

WEEP NO MORE

There had been a time—only a few months ago—when Sara had been as strong and apparently as indestructible as the Cornish rocks on which she now stood, her heart pounding, her body trembling, as she tried desperately to force her way back into the past—Mark's past, his life before they had met in bomb-wracked London, before they had fallen utterly, breathlessly in love.

Only a few months ago she had come to England, to wartime London, to record for the American readers of her syndicated column the dangers and excitements of a city at war. She was very plucky, they said, to leave the comfort of New York for the bombing and blackout and restrictions of a major target. But Sara had felt only the thrill of meeting new people and the challenge of a new experience. She was tough, sophisticated, strong in the pursuit of a profession she elegantly adorned. Then she had met Mark, and found the flat in South Street, and life suddenly took on a depth and meaning she had never known.

But now life changed—dramatically and disastrously. Sara clung to the past in desperation, because she found it impossible to face the future. But the strength to go into the future came to her, and the way of its coming closes this sensitive and perceptive story.

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by
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To my husband

WILLIAM JOYCE COWEN, M.C.

Although his regimental motto is "Facta non verba", I give him these my first printed words in small return for his countless deeds of kindness

**'Weep you no more, sad fountains:
What need you flow so fast?**

Anonymous.

OXFORD BOOK OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY VERSE.,

CHAPTER I

THE Cornish sea sparkled in the August sunshine as the train lurched to a stop. Doors were flung open and holiday visitors poured out, panting to renew their age-long love affair with the sea.

•The English and their sea! Never in their small island more than sixty miles from its salty presence, the years of war had kept them from it. And now, the conflict in Europe over, they came by bus, by train and car; on bicycles and on foot, hungry for the sight and the sound and the smell of it; returning joyfully to its briny bosom like a lover returning to the arms of a mistress. The sea was in their bone and in their blood.

To Sara's American eyes it was a strange, atavistic sight. Like salmon rushing up-stream to spawn; or the lemmings, plunging into the Nordic sea and swimming out to some long-awaited and unknown bliss.

Sara shifted her overnight case, with its steamship label already attached, from one hand to the other. It had grown heavy in the short distance she had carried it, and already her hands and face were damp. Letting the eager crowd speed past her, she moved towards the wooden sign of The Cornwall Arms swinging gently in the breeze.

The town of St. Giles faced directly on to the shingle beach where barbed wire and concrete posts still stood. There was only a cluster of shops: the usual tobacconist, greengrocer and fruiterer; a saddler and the sellers of fishing nets and tackle; a pub with a spray-flecked sign which read, appropriately, The Spotted Boy. And the Post Office. All these overlooked the curved sea wall, and a few straggled around the corner and started up the steep, cobbled hill but abandoned the effort after a few hundred yards. At this point, small houses and cottages took over and began their

upward climb. Near the top of the hill a church nestled in its graveyard.

Fan turned in at The Cornwall Arms, stepping over sand-palls and spades stacked neatly near the door while their small owners lunched reluctantly, and crossed to the reception desk.

The manager looked up from his accounts and blinked.

'Good afternoon,' said Sara. 'I'd like a room and bath.' Then quickly, as she saw surprise deepen on his face, she added, 'For the night.'

But the manager was already shaking his head before she had finished speaking. 'Sorry, madam. We're full up. Everything booked in advance the moment fighting stopped.'

Sara put her overnight case down as if, suddenly, its burden had become too much for her. 'But couldn't you possibly manage *something*? Even without a bath? Just for the one night?'

Something of Sara's need communicated itself to him and his voice took on a tinge of regret. 'I'm sorry, madam. I wish I could, but me and my missus had to give up our own room to an old guest. You see, madam, it's been so long since people could safely visit this part of the sea coast.'

Sara stood for a moment, her pale face shadowed by this fresh problem. 'Is there a train back to Plymouth to-night?'

'Yes, madam. At nine-fifty-seven.'

'May I leave my bag here until then?'

'Certainly, madam.'

Sara picked up her bag and handed it over. 'The name is on the tag.'

The manager glanced at it with a quick, accustomed eye. 'It will be quite safe here,' he said, putting it behind the desk.

Sara reflected how restful it was to have the name mean nothing. She was just another stranger, a foreigner in a country which could never again seem foreign. She was anonymous. No one knew she was in St. Giles. Mark couldn't know. Nor Carter. Unless Jake told him. But Jake could be trusted. She turned away towards the open door and the bright sunlight.

Brushed by children racing to the beach, nosed by friendly dogs, Sara made her way slowly, pausing at the curve in Bredegar Road to look at the fishing nets drying in the sun which fell on the sea wall. Then she turned her gaze up the hill where the road climbed steeply, past little cottages, each with its small garden, until it reached the top, crowned by a crumbling stone wall.

Now that the moment, so longed for and so dreaded, was upon her, Sara's heart quickened painfully. Although her body faced the cobbled hill, her feet failed to carry her forward. She stood, hearing the sound of the waves on the shingle beach, the crying of gulls and the shrill delight of children's voices. Her upper lip prickled with sweat. Then, with the heavy, thrusting gait of one moving through water, Sara started slowly up the hill.

After the first dogged steps, she began to look hungrily about her; to read the names of the little houses: 'Sea View', 'Mon Repos', 'The Gulls'.

And then, half-way up the hill, she came face to face with the name 'Woodbine Cottage' on the letter-box at the gate. Mark's gate. She put her hand out towards it as if touching it would give her, for that brief moment, a link with Mark; but stopped the gesture midway.

She turned her head slowly towards the house, scarcely daring to look. When she did, her eyes rested on a very pretty two-storey cottage with a thatched roof and old oak timbers; and spilling down its walls and cascading over the lintel of the door, the woodbine which gave the cottage its name.

Sara stood staring at it. Those walls had housed the one human being she loved with all her heart; he had walked through that doorway and down that garden path. He had looked out of those windows. He had slept under that roof. Sara wondered if he had slept peacefully, happily. If he had gone to his rest with a quiet heart and wakened with a joyful one, eager to begin another day. As she would never again awaken.

The cottage seemed empty now. Perhaps it was 'To Let'.

She could ask a neighbour if there was a key, and if she might be shown through. The excitement of the thought made her a little dizzy. To actually step inside that house!

Then, from an upper window, she caught the flicker of a curtain and turned away in a panic and started blindly up the hill. Up, past other cottages, other gardens. Up, past the church with its sleeping parishioners, safe in the graveyard. Up, breathless, to the top of the hill where she stood, panting, her knees trembling and the sea and the sky whirling about her.

Then she became gratefully aware of the old wall and sat on the warm stones and let the warm, briny air bathe her upturned face. One hand traced the lichen clinging tightly to the stones; a hand which looked unfamiliar to her. It was too white, too thin; and the nails had grown long in the weeks of her illness. Her hands looked oddly useless. As she, herself, felt useless.

After a time her heart ceased its thick pounding and she became conscious of the rhythmic beating of the sea below. And a sense of peace and space and time suspended came over her. The rocks and the sea. The rocks, so firm in their jagged strength; the sea so wild, so untamed, so unending in its assault. And yet the rocks stood. Life should be like that. One should be able to take the pounding, the bitter attack; to stand, bared to the wind and the rain, and yet endure. There had been a time when Sara had felt as strong and as indestructible as the rocks which lay below her.

But that had been months ago. Before she came to England. Before that November day when her ship, led by a convoy across the Atlantic, like a blind man across a dangerous street, had docked at a shrouded port. It was to have been only for a short stay and she found London, in spite of the bombing and the black-out and the restrictions, exciting. It was packed with interesting people, fresh from interesting jobs, and she was one of them. They all felt it was plucky of her to be there. But Sara was used to doing so-called plucky things, and laughed it off. As she had laughed off so many things in her crowded life.

And then she had met Mark. And life suddenly took on a

depth and meaning which, as the memory came back, left her breathless with longing. It couldn't be over! The picture of her London flat returned with sickening clarity. No. 11 South Street. Sara knew she could never see that number again without seeing Mark's face; without hearing his key in the latch, and his eager foot on the stair. She clung to the past with the desperate tentacles of her mind like the lichen under her fingers clung to the warm stones. And below her lay the sea with its timeless surge and the rocks with the waves breaking over them and the spray and the foam running down their furrowed cheeks like tears.

CHAPTER II

No. 11 South Street. The key rasped in the lock, the old door swung easily on its solid, old hinges and Mrs. Bunker and the fog came in together. London fog. Not a regular 'pea-souper', but a thin, bitter fog which left traces of soot and grime to smudge the face and streak the hair.

But Mrs. Bunker didn't mind the fog. What's a bit of fog when you're in a war? Mrs. Bunker didn't really mind the war, except for the house she lived in having been bombed flat while she was out buying a kipper. Mrs. Bunker's life had been one long war about one thing or another. Peace was just a word in a book.

As a matter of fact, life was a good bit brighter for Mrs. Bunker now than it had been before, with the air-raids to break the monotony and the cosy life of the shelters where one could spend the night in a comfortable chaos of babies, beer, song and sleep. And Mrs. Bunker was especially popular in shelter society now that she could bring stories of the American lady she worked for. 'Obliged', as Mrs. Bunker put it. Stories of nylons and American cigarettes and food parcels containing treasures of butter and bacon and tea. Treasures which Sara shared with her and which enabled Mrs. Bunker to be almost regal in her relations with her shelter companions.

'No, thank you, Mrs. Miggs,' she would say. 'No dripping, I had a nice bit of bacon to my tea. 'Yes, my American lady. Very kind she is.' Even gives me tea and sugar to take home to Bunker.'

As these thoughts flitted across Mrs. Bunker's mind like the wispy fog which still hung about her, Big Ben struck the hour. Eight o'clock. Mrs. Bunker automatically checked the time with the small American alarm-clock which stood on the mantelpiece above the cold, ash-filled grate. There was a flicker of disappointment in her eyes as she saw that the little clock was accurate to the split second. Mrs. Bunker had a secret suspicion that in a country which moved as fast as America, even their clocks would race ahead of time.

Eight o'clock in the evening might seem an odd hour to most people to be tidying up a flat from the night before, but Mrs. Bunker took it in her stride. It gave her a nice, long lie in bed in the morning and extra pay for working at night.

Besides, Mrs. Bunker liked Sara Scott. Working for a woman like Sara brought a tingle to the worn edges of her life; it was like taking hold of those wooden handles on the little boxes at the Fun Fair and, as you grasped them, waves of electricity passed through your body. She had only experienced that sensation once, but the pleasurable memory of it had stayed with her and when she met Sara Scott she felt it again: that sudden contact with an alien current: something that stirred the blood in her sixty-year-old veins and made her remember the Fun Fair and her youth and the dreams that went with it.

Then the empty grate yawned a reproach at her and she dropped down on her knees before it and gathered the litter of cigarette stubs and crumpled wads of paper into a heap. Mrs. Bunker sighed a little as she saw the number of cigarettes that had been smoked. Of course, some of them had been his, but even so, Miss Scott smoked too much. It was all that writing did it. Look at this mess of paper! That's the way it was every night. Ten pages crumpled up and thrown disgustedly into the fire for every one she kept. Polishing, Miss Scott called it. For her part, Mrs. Bunker

would sooner polish a grate, which she proceeded to do with astonishing vigour. Soft, grey ashes swept out. Hard black coal put in. Then one of the crumpled balls of paper smoothed out to twist into a spill to light the fire. Just before Mrs. Bunker's grimy little hands started to shape the paper, her eyes fell on a half-written paragraph. Part of Sara's daily column to *The New York Ledger*, whose proud slogan is 'The Paper That Wakes You Up'.

Mrs. Bunker squinted her little, hooded eyes and her mouth grew into an anxious pucker as she half-read out the words.

'This is woman's coming of age. No longer is she a weak, emotional creature to be sheltered and protected by man. She is learning to think for herself, act for herself, stand on her own feet to emerge, clear-eyed, clear-minded, strong and resolute.'

Mrs. Bunker reflected. She'd been standing on her own feet ever since she was eleven and she certainly didn't look clear-eyed, nor 'd she feel clear-minded. And no man had ever protected her. So thinking, Mrs. Bunker twisted the paper into a spill and lighted the fire and sat back on her heels for a moment, enjoying its warmth.

Then the telephone gave its imperious double ring, and Mrs. Bunker scrambled to her feet and lifted the receiver, handling it as respectfully as if it were a bomb. Sara's warm, brisk voice cut through the distance, splitting it as cleanly as a knife cuts through an apple.

'Hello, there, Mrs. Bunker. Did a parcel come from America?'

'I don't know, madam, I just got 'ere. It might be in the service lift. 'Alf a mo' while I look.'

That was one of the things Sara loved about Mrs. Bunker; her brief excursions into decorum with 'madams' sprinkled through her conversation like raisins in a cake; then her descents into cockney informality. Sara flipped a match alight with a polished, but short, thumb-nail, an expert, accustomed gesture; then lighted a cigarette as she waited for Mrs. Bunker to return to the telephone. From behind her came a hum of voices. Male voices. Sara turned and

watched the poker game that was going on in the London office of *The New York Ledger*. Watched it through the thick smoke which was as stimulating to her lungs as clean mountain air. Years of newspaper work had done that. She heard Jake's unmistakably American speech rising above the English voices of the others. Good old Jake! Sara smiled at him. Smiled at his nice, ugly bulldog face; his tousled hair and the ashes that always rested on his waistcoat.

Jake caught the look and smiled back. There wasn't another woman in the world like Sara Scott. Quite a girl! And that column of hers; SARA SCOTT SAYS. It frequently said a mouthful! He and the Boss had had to wriggle out of a good many tight spots Sara had put them in. But she was music to the ears of the circulation department. Quite a girl. And quite a dish, with her beautiful, simple clothes and her beautiful simple jewels which only cost a fortune. Her extraordinarily vital and attractive face; her smooth hair; her polish and her poise. Yet under that smooth hair you could feel her mind rippling like the muscles of an athlete. And there was a kind of sweetness about her which didn't show in her column. Or maybe that quality was something new. Something that had happened during her stay in London.

He looked from Sara to Mark Trevor, seated across the table from him, and wondered how much he had to do with it. Jake had never seen Sara quite like this before. Not in all the ten years he'd known her. He wondered how the Boss was going to like it.

Sara turned back to the telephone. 'Yes, Mrs. Bunker, I'm here. . . . Oh, good! Tick 'em off, will you? . . . Shaving soap. That's for you, Ronnie,' she called out over her shoulder. 'Powdered milk . . . cod-liver oil . . . flannel . . . good Lord!' She burst into laughter as she turned from the telephone. 'You'll murder me, Eric; I got the flannel for your shirts, but it's *pink*!'

'Don't give it a thought, Sara; I'll wear it if they chase me in the streets,' came Eric's voice.

The rest of the items were checked off briskly and Sara

hung up and went back towards the poker game, circling the table on the way back to her own seat.

'Cheese for you and Mollie, Ian,' she said to a young, fair-haired boy who looked scarcely old enough to have a wife but was already invalided out of the Air Force.

'You know, Sara, the way Mollie talks and dreams about cheese I begin to think I married a mouse-trap!'

'Butter and bacon for you and the brats, Johnny.'

Johnny Worth looked up from his cards with an affectionate grin. 'I'd best prepare you, Sara. You'll probably get revolting hand-made "gifties" from the kiddies, smeared with grease.'

Ronnie, a shy man with a grave, slow voice, spoke to Sara as she passed his chair. 'You're much too generous, Sara, you and Jake. You shouldn't give everything away.'

'He's right,' echoed Ian. 'You ought to keep something for yourself.'

Sara paused behind Mark's chair and her hands rested lightly, but possessively, on his shoulders as she replied with a little smile. 'Don't worry about me. I don't need a thing. I've got everything I want. Everything.'

Mark was dealing the cards and his hands faltered for an instant. He was acutely aware of her touch. Then Sara moved on and took her seat, separated from his by one, and Mark finished the deal while Sara looked at him and wondered why everyone at the table didn't hear the clamour in her blood, and the pounding of her heart.

Mark Trevor had the intense, dark face of the true Cornishman to whom a man from any other county is still a 'foreigner'. Cornwall, that bit of England that runs off into the sea, where every rocky cave has its history of smuggling, where the land is soaked in legend; and the Phoenicians, after nearly three thousand years, still leave the imprint of their ancient presence on the Mediterranean features and the quick bodies of Cornishmen.

With her eyes still fixed on Mark, Sara asked herself, as she had every day of her life for these past months, what there was in a man's face that could so move her. A sardonic

twist of the eyebrow, a half-wry, half-humorous twist of the mouth. A look from the eyes which was at once intimate and remote.

What was it that so held her? Charm? Many men had that. Youth? Sara had not yet reached an age when that seemed too important. Honesty, ardour and a kind of delicate strength? Yes. But when Sara added them all up the total was far in excess of the component parts. It was like adding two and two and two, and getting ten thousand. And it always came out that way.

Sara picked up her cards. Despite the probings of her mind and the complexities of her heart, she could play poker with the cool detachment of a man, as Jake knew to his sorrow.

'Queens or better to open, isn't it?' Sara asked.

'Queens or better,' said Jake with a sigh and got ready to defend his pile of chips.

* * *

Mark and Sara left the office of *The Ledger* together after the poker game, and walked along the dark, soot-blackened streets, Sara warm in her fur coat, but warmer for the presence of Mark by her side. They moved in companionable silence, the fog soft and thick about them. Then Sara spoke as their groping feet struck the rubble of a freshly bombed building.

'That's new since last night.'

'There's always a new one,' Mark replied in an oddly resonant voice. A voice to remember; cultivated, yet with a soft Cornish burr which made it curiously attractive.

They picked their way cautiously through the still warm bricks and stone. How their lives were threaded with danger, Sara thought, and tightened the hold of her hand on his arm as she spoke.

'I wonder what it will feel like to be safe again?'

'Perhaps we'll never know.'

'I wouldn't like that! I wouldn't like that at all. Six months isn't enough!'

'It's more than a lot of poor blighters get.'

'But we're not a lot of poor blighters! We're us!'

Mark turned and looked at her through the fog which could not conceal the sudden passion in her face.

'Meaning we're "special"?' Mark asked, his voice a little mocking and more than a little tender.

'You bet we're special! Don't we risk our necks every day, every moment, to give people a picture of all this? We don't have to do it. Nobody forced us into our jobs. We picked them!'

'We get paid for it,' was Mark's laconic reply.

He stopped abruptly in the shadow of a shattered brick wall and took Sara almost violently in his arms and kissed her; a kiss which left her shaken.

'Jolly well paid!' Mark added, a little shaken himself. Then a taxi with its veiled eyes swung cautiously around the corner and Mark hailed it.

'Here's your taxi, Sara.'

Sara hesitated. 'You take it—you haven't too much time before your broadcast.'

Mark glanced at the radium dial of his watch. 'I could do with a look at the last news bulletins before I go on the air.'

'I'm only a few blocks from home. I'll go on and bang out my column.'

As Mark got into the taxi, Sara called after him. 'You'll leave right after the broadcast, won't you?'

Mark smiled as he leaned out of the door. 'Did you ever hear of a homing pigeon?' Then the door slammed and the taxi wobbled off into the combined hazards of fog and blackout.

Sara watched the departing cab for a moment and her own words came back to her—'I wonder what it will feel like to be safe again?' Then she remembered what joy those months of danger had brought and hugged the memory to herself as she went on her way.

* * *

Mark tried to relax in the dubious comfort of the cab but he was too highly keyed. He remembered hearing once of a safe-breaker who used to sand-paper his finger-tips to make them sensitive to the delicate tumblers of a combination lock. Mark

often felt that during these past months all his nerve-ends were in that highly sensitized state. Ever since he had first met Sara. She was like a new continent, an undiscovered country. Nothing in his experience had prepared him for a woman like Sara.

Barring his time at Cambridge, Mark had spent all his life in Cornwall with the sound of the sea in his ears; growing up in the studious quiet of an old farm-house with his school-master father and his home-loving mother; with older brothers and sisters who cherished this late and welcomed child. Lessons at home until he was old enough for the ancient Grammar School where his father taught, wisely interspersed with delicious days of idleness spent fishing or boating on the river. And when he could manage the steep and rocky descent by himself, magic hours in the ruins of King Arthur's castle at Tintagel where the Knights of the Round Table had lived their magic lives. All the legends ran together in his mind like a bright ribbon: the Quest of the Holy Grail, the loves of Lancelot and Guinevere, of Tristram and Iseult; the saintly King Arthur and the motto emblazoned on the hearts of his followers: 'Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King. Else, wherefore born?'

He knew great stretches of the *Idylls of the King* by heart; once, as he knelt down trembling in the ruins of the castle seeking shelter from one of Cornwall's sudden storms, the words of Tennyson ran fearfully through his brain:

All the heavens
Open'd and blazed with thunder such as seem'd
Shoutings of all the sons of God.

And in the rolling beauty of the lines he lost his fear.

His worship of Lancelot was not lessened by his grief when, of all the Knights, it was Lancelot who failed to find the Grail because of his love for Guinevere. His guilty love, for which he put aside the pure affection of Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat.

The shackles of an old love straiten'd him,
His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.

The echo of these words always brought a shimmering sadness. There was a melancholy majesty in the phrase 'faith unfaithful' which rang through his boyish mind like the tolling of a bell.

After these trips to the ruins of the castle Mark would return home with his bare legs scratched by the sharp rocks, his face salty with sea-spray, his eyes blazing with dreams. An imaginative little boy growing up in a wild, imaginative land, rich with stories of spells and love-potions; of the doings of giants and fairies and mermaids and demons; where old women were fey and, with their filmy eyes, could gaze into the future.

Mark suddenly felt the fierce wish that he could see into the future now. And at the same instant, knew that he wilfully blinded himself. 'Take a day at a time,' he kept telling himself. 'A day at a time.' And every day there was Sara.

Strange, a boy who grew up on dreams of Guinevere and Elaine and Iseult, to become so enchained by a woman like Sara. A woman who was so free from a sense of the past. So intensely modern. But, Mark reminded himself, perhaps those women of King Arthur's time were also modern; perhaps they were as different from the ordinary women of their day as Sara was from any woman he had ever known. Different from his sisters; from the girls he had grown up with. Different from Kay.

The taxi stopped with a gentle lurch in front of the grey hulk of the B.B.C. building and Mark escaped from his thoughts with gratitude.

CHAPTER III

MRS. BUNKER had the flat restored to order. The coal fire, encouraged by the sight of Mrs. Bunker's industry, was out-doing itself in the way of warmth and brightness. The thick curtains had been drawn, the flowered chintz loose-covers straightened and a gate-legged table laid for two was placed near the fire. Mrs. Bunker had done all this with

her depressed little-pancake of a hat still perched on her head, which gave her a curiously impermanent air.

Sara, changed into velvet lounging pyjamas, sat in front of her typewriter under its work-light, typing and smoking. Her dark, blonde hair shone under the work-light, which fell on it and on her fine, pale skin; skin that tanned beautifully in the summer and even now, after an English winter, had a faint olive tint. Her eyes were a greenish-hazel under eye-brows which were very nearly black. People said that Sara darkened her brows and lashes, and she did. But they were, by nature, a good deal darker than her hair. This artifice, plus a bright lipstick, was all the make-up Sara used. Her face was saved from beauty by a nose a little too short; but this defect, if defect it was, added charm, and off-set the intelligent brow and wide-spaced eyes. And there was a stubborn set to her jaw which was at variance with the delicate modelling of her cheeks and temples. It was, in a curious way, the face of two women: one, ardent, responsive, intensely personal, almost voluptuous, if one could judge by the curve of her mouth. The other, impersonal, disciplined, almost austere in her intellectual detachment; the kind of woman to whom her sex was a happy accident to be enjoyed, but not used. That these two women had never locked in battle was Sara's good fortune. If they ever were, it would take a shrewd observer to foretell which would be the victor, which the victim.

Sara paused from time to time to re-read, to frown at the copy and cross out lines which displeased her fastidious mind, or to approve. This last, not often. Occasionally her eyes went to the little alarm-clock on the mantelpiece. The silence of the room was unbroken save by Sara's brisk typing and Mrs. Bunker's trips to and from the kitchen. The last of one of these coincided with Sara's impatient pulling of a sheet of paper from the typewriter and tossing it, in a crumpled ball, on to the hearth. As she paused to take a fresh cigarette and flipped a match alight with her thumb-nail, Mrs. Bunker ventured to speak.

'I was reading a bit o' that stuff about woman's coming of

h'age. The bits you threw away, she added with a gesture to the paper lying on the hearth. 'Do you believe all that madam, or do you just write it?'

Sara stared at her in astonishment. 'Of course I believe it, or I couldn't write it.' At least, not so that other women would believe it.'

'And do they, madam?' Mrs. Bunker said with mild inquiry in her voice.

Sara felt vaguely irritated. But she quickly overcame the feeling; she respected Mrs. Bunker. She twisted around in her chair to see her better.

'Well, within limits. Look, I don't mean to imply that women *obey* my column. That would be silly of them to do, and of me to expect. And it's not a question of laying down laws; I wouldn't presume to do that for anyone; it's more a matter of, well, pointing out rules. Simple ones, to live by.' She added, 'Besides I write about a great many other things: world affairs and education and social progress—'

But Mrs. Bunker brushed these last words aside as if they were dust. 'It's not so easy for a woman to live by rules when there's a man in 'er life.'

'Oh, that's an old-fashioned idea, Mrs. Bunker. Woman is an individual. She wants to be strong and stand by herself. Not live by worn-out customs. Customs mostly made by men.'

Mrs. Bunker held her ground stubbornly, looking at Sara with her wise little eyes. 'I don't know, madam. No matter what happens to women, men seem to have a lot to do with it. It's like taking a nice bowl of h'eggs, when we 'ad h'eggs, and scrambling them with a fork. That's what a man does to your life.' She paused, then asked Sara earnestly, 'Did you ever try to un-scramble a h'egg, madam?'

Before Sara could find an answer to this frightening question, the alarm-clock rang shrilly. With the automatic movement which comes from habit, Sara swung swiftly in her chair to the wireless beside her typewriter and turned it on. Mrs. Bunker recognized the accustomed gesture and returned to the kitchen, while Sara pushed her chair away a

little and leaned back to listen to Mark's voice as it came over the wireless. It possessed a kind of youthful gravity which had won him many listeners.

This is the Overseas Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation. It has been a quiet day in London. Quiet, save for the occasional buzz bombs. These missiles have created a new kind of fear. There is no siren—no warning. If you hear a strike, you know you have not been hit. If you are hit, you hear nothing. To-day the damage done was comparatively slight; I walked around the bombed areas and as I did so I remembered the report made by a distinguished American who broadcasts from London. I would like to repeat it to you.'

He read quietly, almost conversationally.

"I went into a shop in Bond Street to buy a hat. A bowler: what we call a derby at home. It is the only hat which does not become sodden with rain. But I felt rather foolish when I tried it on and the proprietor said, 'If you're not certain, sir, come back to-morrow.' 'What if you're not here to-morrow?' I said. I wish I could describe the look which accompanied the reply! 'Of course we shall be here. We've been in business here for a hundred and fifty years.' "

Mark paused after this excerpt, then added his own comment, during which his easy tone took on an undercurrent of passionate conviction.

'But I think the proprietor mistakes what that business is. It is not the dispensing of hats and handkerchiefs over the same counter for a hundred and fifty years. It is the dispensing of courage, common sense and dignity from one small battered island. That is the business the British are in and have been in for more than nine hundred years!'

As Mark finished saying these words, Sara let her mind reflect upon them, while he went on to other pieces of news. How stuffy that speech would have sounded to her six months ago! And she realized with a pang how easy it is to misunderstand the British. To fail to see their strange mixture of modesty and pride; of admiration in the face of another's courage and humility in the face of their own.

Sara had made many trips to London before this one and had not felt especially drawn to the land or to the people. Now she realized that she had never more than scratched the surface. The excitement and gaiety of a London season with the Derby, Ascot, garden-parties and presentations at Court had concealed from her the hard core of the people. And she had had the American's instinctive shying away from titles and pomp and Oxford accents; until she learned that they all took their proper place and were regarded as much less important here than they were at home: that kind hearts were more than coronets and truth and faith and honour shone more brightly than any decoration that could be bestowed. Much of this she had learned from Mark, but she owed much to other people as well. You couldn't live and work for six long months with the men and women who carried on uncomplainingly in the face of danger, discomfort and possible death, without learning something about them, and what Sara had learned made her wince at her earlier impressions. Even Jake, tough, hard-bitten newspaper man that he was, used to say, 'You know, Sara, these Limeys have got something. Part of the time I don't know whether to kick 'em or kiss 'em; but whichever it is, I love 'em!'

Mark finished his broadcast and Sara came to with a start. He'd be on his way to the flat in no time and Sara turned back to her copy. It simply had to be finished before Mark came; this was the hour of the day that made all the other hours worth living; their time alone when they could give themselves up to discovering all over again the delight of having found each other. It never grew stale; the excitement renewed itself each time they were together. Even though they had parted so short a time before, Sara's hands trembled as she typed.

★ ★ ★

Mrs. Bunker came in from the kitchen after dinner, thrusting her stumpy little arms into the sleeves of her coat, and paused beside Sara and Mark, still seated at the table in front of the fire, lingering over their coffee and cigarettes.

‘Will there be anything else, madam?’ she asked.

‘Not a thing, Mrs. Bunker,’ replied Sara, adding, ‘Your dinner was absolutely tops. As it always is.’

‘Thank you, madam,’ bowed Mrs. Bunker with the air of one accepting an accolade.

Then Sara’s eye fell on Mark’s wrist watch, its dial turned upward as her hand lay in his. Eleven o’clock! ‘Oh, Mrs. Bunker, I had no idea it was so late! It’s very kind of you to come to us at this difficult hour.’

‘Oh, it’s not an ‘ard time for me, madam. You see, when I’m ‘ere, Bunker’s ‘ome; and when I’m ‘ome, ‘e’s at work.’

Sara looked at her, rather puzzled. ‘That’s what I meant. You never see each other.’

‘Yes, madam. That’s what *I* meant,’ was Mrs. Bunker’s laconic reply.

Sara could not keep the words from flying to her lips. ‘But, if that’s the way you feel, why did you marry him?’

Mrs. Bunker’s tone became confidential. ‘I’ve never told this to anyone before, but you seem different somehow—you and the mister.’ This last with a bob of the head towards Mark’s relaxed, amused face. ‘There was a thick, pea-soup fog when ‘e popped the question and I never did see ‘im proper.’

Before either Sara or Mark could find a suitable reply, Mrs. Bunker retired into her professional manner, as one who has unbent sufficiently. ‘Good night, madam. Good night, sir.’

As the door closed behind her, Sara and Mark burst into astonished laughter. Then Sara, her hand still in Mark’s, turned to him.

‘I wouldn’t ha’ve had to see *you* proper! Just heard your voice—and touched your ‘and——’ She broke off and laid her cheek down on his upturned palm and her words came, blurred and broken. ‘I lost it all—everything—from that first meeting; that first moment.’

Mark lifted her face up to his, her chin cupped in his hand. And I found it.’

‘Never let me go!’

‘Never!’

Then Sara, a little self-conscious at her sudden show of feeling, got up abruptly. ‘Such emotion, right on top of dinner! Isn’t that supposed to give you ulcers, or something?’ She pulled Mark up from the straight-backed chair in which he was sitting. ‘Come and be comfortable.’

‘Not too comfortable. I’ve that convoy to meet at four o’clock.’ Mark moved to an armchair on the other side of the fireplace as he spoke while Sara sat cross-legged on the floor at his feet, leaning back against his knees. She looked into the glowing coals of the fire, lapped in contentment.

Mark cast his gaze about the room, taking in its warmth and comfort; the bits of silver gleaming, his pipe-rack at his elbow, the sense of being shut off from the world. He sighed happily as he reached for a pipe, and sank further down in the deep chair. He still marvelled at having found, in one woman, both tranquillity and excitement.

‘You’re a never-ending wonder, Sara. In the midst of bombed-out London, you manage to create this—this island of peace.’

Sara smiled, a smile of pure happiness, but she made her voice light. ‘Nonsense. It’s all Mrs. Bunker’s magic touch.’

‘It’s magic, but it’s not Mrs. Bunker’s. Two hundred years ago, you’d have been burned for a witch. You’ve all sorts of magic, Sara. I didn’t know there was a woman like you, anywhere.’

‘There isn’t,’ said Sara with satisfaction. ‘Not just, “anywhere”. I grew myself this way on purpose.’

Her eyes, still gazing into the fire, narrowed as her thoughts went winging back to the past; a past filled with struggle and desire and achievement.

‘I made up my mind I’d be a certain kind of woman, if it killed me. And it damn near did!’

‘But you won.’

‘We won,’ Sara corrected him. ‘Me and the dream.’

She half-twisted around so that she could look up into his face. ‘You see, I invented the Sara Scott I wanted to be and set her up like a beacon ahead of me; then day by day, almost

hour by hour, I narrowed the distance between us. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot; but, even if I had to crawl on my hands and knees, every day I came a tiny bit closer.'

A curious kind of bite came into Sara's voice as she remembered that struggle; that painful, stubborn pursuit. 'I wanted to be the kind of woman I am with a passion that almost frightens me, when I let myself remember. The kind of woman who always looks ahead—never back. Who never trades on sex—never makes a glib alibi—who kicks or curses when things go wrong, but never, never whines! Who meets life with a tidy mind. I don't believe even *you* know what a passion I have for order. I never faced a problem in my life, and I've faced some tough ones, without first brushing my teeth and combing my hair and dressing myself carefully and exquisitely from head to foot, as if I were going to a party. That made me the person I'd made myself. Not that strange, irrational creature a woman can be with her hair uncombed and her face unwashed; mind and body in disorder.' She stopped abruptly. 'Does this make sense to you?'

Mark smiled at her intensity. It made her seem oddly young and vulnerable, in spite of her brave words.

'Not much. But you can't have it two ways. You can't make sense and make magic all at the same time. Unless,' he added thoughtfully, 'magic makes sense.'

As Mark spoke, he put both hands on Sara's shoulders and turned her still farther around so that she lay back against one knee, looking up into his face. 'Sara, Sara, do you know how much I love you?'

'Tell me again. I like to listen.'

'You're a greedy woman.'

'Yes, thank God!'

'Sometimes I think you're every kind of woman. Sweet and exciting and funny and infuriating. But never mean, never petty. And you make so few demands. You never ask questions. Most women go about armed with a locksmith's kit, ready to pry open every nook and corner of man's mind.'



'Maybe I don't have to,' Sara said contentedly. 'Maybe I know every nook and corner.'

Mark, for answer, drew her up into his arms, holding her, kissing her; and thoughts and words and time were forgotten.

And then that intruder which comes, not like a thief in the night, but like a bold assassin knocking at the door, broke the spell. The telephone. Mark's hand groped for the instrument on the table beside him and he drew away from Sara as he answered it.

'It's for you, Sara.' He handed the telephone over to her. 'Jake calling.'

All her life Sara was to wonder why she felt no foreboding as she took the phone, no sense of doom; that nothing warned her, not even that instinct, that 'hunch' of which she was so proud. 'I always know what's going to happen,' Sara used to say. 'My finger-tips know it, and the roots of my hair know it. They tingle.' But nothing happened now; only the telephone cord was too short to reach and Sara managed to talk into the mouthpiece by the simple expedient of lying flat on her back. And when she spoke, her heart was light and her voice was gay.

'Hello, Jake. What gives?'

Mark reached for one of his pipes and flipped a match alight with his thumb-nail, Sara's gesture. Or his. So he didn't see the look that came over her face as Jake told her. Sara caught her breath.

'Who? . . . Oh, no! But, *why*? And when did you find out? . . . Sure, I'll meet the plane. You'll be there, too? . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . okay, Jake. And thanks.'

Sara hung up slowly, and still lay at full length on her back, as if, for the moment, she hadn't the pull in her muscles to bring her to her feet. She spoke vaguely in the direction of Mark. 'It's the Boss. He's flying in from America by Clipper to-night.'

'I wish I could drive you. But that convoy——'

Sara sat up slowly, her face gone a little pale. 'That's okay. They're sending a car around for me in half an hour.'

'I can't see why you have to meet the plane. You may stand about the airport for hours.'

'I have to meet it because it's the Boss.' Sara got to her feet, her body tense now, ready for battle.* She started to undo the braided frogs that held the top of her lounging pyjamas as she spoke. 'Look, I'm the girl who came to dinner. I hopped over here for six weeks and stayed six months! That'll take some explaining and I'd jolly well better be there to do it.'

'The Boss sounds a tough old codger.'

'He's not old, but he's tough. In a very smooth way.' Then with an abrupt change of subject, as she started towards her bedroom door: 'Going to try to get some sleep before your date with the convoy?'

'Got my report to make out first,' Mark started to rise, then gave a little exclamation at the twinge in his knee. 'That blasted knee!'

Sara paused in her walk to the bedroom. 'I love that knee! If it weren't for that they'd have you off somewhere being shot at!' As she stood there, her blouse top open at the neck and half-slipping off one shoulder, Mark crossed to her and took her in a close embrace.

'Don't go.'

'I must.'

'It's a dismal night and a filthy drive down in the blackout.'

'I know.'

'And I don't have to leave for hours yet.'

'But, your report——'

'That can wait.'

Sara felt an overwhelming desire to rest within the hard ring of his arms; to send the car away empty; to stay in the shelter of these shabby walls which had become home. Every hour together was an hour gained. Every hour apart, an hour lost. For ever.

Mark felt the unconscious yielding of her body. He laid his cheek against her hair, holding her closer still.

'Let Jake go.'

'Jake is going.'

'Then why must you?

'The Boss expects it.'

●As Sara said these words, she knew she had no choice but to go. In all her life, though the hard years and the plush ones, Sara had never shirked a duty. And this was a duty, plus.

She looked up at Mark and smiled. 'Don't tempt me.'

Mark looked at her, without smiling. 'Every time could be the last, you know.'

Sara tried to hold back the icy, desolate fear which swept over her at these words. At this thought.

'Not for us!' she cried. 'Not for us. We're special. Remember?'

'I remember you said we were,' Mark replied gravely.

'But, you believe it! You *must* believe it! Say that you do!'

'I do believe it. I do say it.' He smiled now, a tender, teasing smile. 'Darling, Sara, did you know that you have a Puritan conscience?'

A shy, almost guilty look came over Sara's face. 'Yes. But I didn't know that *you* knew it.'

Still smiling, Mark released her from his arms, then bent over and kissed her quietly on the lips. 'There now, go and meet your plane, Sara, like a good girl.'

And with his kiss warm on her mouth, and suffused with happiness, Sara went into her bedroom and started to dress. Suddenly, she was eager to go, eager to meet the plane; to do, swiftly and well, what had to be done. And as her hands mechanically laid out her clothes, the beautifully cut tweed suit, soft as butter, the shining alligator shoes, the matching bag, the emerald clip to hold the scarf at her throat, she kept saying to herself, over and over again, 'After to-night everything will be different; better, more wonderful than ever before!'

CHAPTER IV

JAKE came out of the airport canteen where he had been briefing the newspaper boys on what to ask the Boss, and

what not to ask' the Boss. Jake had been with Carter Reynolds for twelve years; longer than Sara. They were a strange combination, Jake and Reynolds; one from St. Paul's and Harvard, the other from Brooklyn and the Bronx. But they spoke the same language with a different accent. The Boss hadn't told him why he was flying over, but Jake had a pretty good idea. He wondered how much the Boss would ask him, and how much he would tell if asked. He walked along in the swirling fog, his head buried in his upturned coat-collar, asking himself questions and giving unsatisfactory answers. As he turned the corner of the canteen he saw Sara, walking up and down, her mink coat held tightly about her, her heels beating out a brisk, rhythmic step. As Jake quickened his step to catch up with her, he wondered if she was playing the question-answer game, too. 'Hi, Sara,' called Jake, as he reached her side. 'Still drawing to inside straights?'

'And filling them! What time does this plane actually get in, Jake?'

Sara stopped and, using Jake's solid bulk as a shield against the blowing mist, flipped a match alight with her familiar gesture.

'Neat, the way you do that, Sara. What I want to know is, who taught who?'

'Mark taught me.' Sara lighted her cigarette, then added: 'He taught me a lot.'

'You knew a lot already.' Jake joined his steps to hers as she resumed her restless pacing.

'Well, I wish I knew what time this plane's coming in.'

'Any time now. Another ten minutes, maybe.'

'Did all the boys turn up?'

'Sure. Sure. The Boss's a pretty important guy. Or did you forget that?'

'I never forget anything,' said Sara.

'Neither does the Boss.'

There was a moment's silence after this, then Jake spoke. 'Like some coffee? Tea? We've got time.'

'Thanks. I've had both. I've been waiting around this place for three hours!'

Jake took her in, from shining head to polished heels. 'You don't look it. Not a hair out of place. How do you keep so elegant?'

'It's easy. I feel elegant. That's something that works from the inside out.'

Jake looked at Sara as she spoke and thought how right she was; the sort of elegance Sara had couldn't be picked off a clothes rack.

They walked along in silence for a few moments, Jake, like so many thick-set men, matching Sara's steps with an elephantine grace of his own. And as he walked he wondered if this was one of the times you proved your friendship by talking, or by keeping your mouth shut. Maybe he could be subtle. Try an oblique approach.

'Let me think, now,' Jake began casually, 'how long is it since you saw the Boss?'

Sara didn't even turn her head. 'You know exactly how long it is. Six months. And don't be subtle.'

Jake grinned in the darkness. But he stuck to his casual tone. 'So it is,' he replied, as if surprised by the swift passage of time. 'I remember that night before you left, and the party the Boss threw for you. That was something! Topped all the others by a mile. Christmas. New Year's Eve. All of them.' He sighed as he remembered. 'Swell parties, weren't they, Sara?'

'They ought to have been. They cost enough,' was Sara's terse reply.

'Sure. The Boss spent his life collecting the best of everything. But you were the pick of his collection. He never gave a party without you to grace it. Not after you moved into his life.'

Jake was where he wanted to be now. He narrowed his eyes as he looked into the fog.

'I can see you, trailing your long skirts over those floors—black and white marble like a chessboard. And you the queen, with all the men loving you—and all the gals hating you—'

Sara stopped and faced Jake indignantly.

'They didn't hate me! I like women and women like me. I know what makes them tick. I write about them every day of my life. And there isn't a big city in America where women don't read my column as regularly as they brush their teeth!'

'Sure. Sure,' Jake agreed amiably. 'And eat grape-fruit afterwards to get back on the alkaline side.'

'They need a little acid. Women are growing up. You can't feed them sugar-pap all their lives.' She added stubbornly, 'But they didn't hate me.'

'Okay. Maybe they didn't. Not you. Maybe they just hated what you stood for. After all, you had the best brains and the best legs and the biggest pay cheque of any columnist in New York—and could marry the Boss, plus several cool millions—'

Sara interrupted. 'Now that's something I always wanted to know. Why are cool millions better than hot millions?'

Jake paid no attention whatsoever to the interruption but kept on in his drawling, persistent voice. 'They used to say, maybe you liked the sense of power it gave you, keeping a man as important as Carter Reynolds dangling.'

Sara pitched her cigarette away where it smouldered damply on the ground. 'Jake, how's about minding your own business?'

'Of course, I knew it wasn't anything like that,' Jake went on smoothly. 'Not with a man like the Boss. Not with a woman like you.'

Sara turned abruptly and took hold of both Jake's coat lapels and looked up into his troubled, homely face, her own filled with a kind of loving anger.

'Damn you, Jake! He's the best friend I ever had and you know it!'

'Don't make it past tense, Sara,' said Jake, putting his hands over hers as she held on to him.

'I'm not making it anything. I'm not dealing the cards. Don't you see, Jake, you reach a point where you have to take what life gives you. Play the hand the way it's dealt.'

'Win, lose or draw?'

'Win, lose or draw,' Sara echoed. And dropped her hands and half-turned away, weariness in every muscle. Even her voice grew suddenly toneless. 'Thanks for what you're trying to do, Jake. Thanks a lot.'

Jake looked at her thoughtfully. 'That column of yours, SARA SCOTT SAYS—'

'Yes, Jake . . .'

'Sara Scott had better be thinking of something pretty damn good to say, right now.'

And as he spoke, the roar of the motor penetrated the darkness and the fog above them. 'Here she comes!'

Sara stared up into the cold blackness and shivered. Jake put a steadying hand on her shoulder. 'Remember, Sara—he's the best.'

'Oh, yes, I'll always remember that.' And she said it with sadness mixed with a curious kind of joy. She knew what she was putting aside. The certain for the uncertain. The proven for the improved.

She gave Jake a little push away from her. 'I'll let you and the boys get to him first. Better tell them he's in.' And, even as she spoke, the dark throbbing body of the plane passed by them with a rush of icy air.

'Sure. Sure. They'll want to beat it back to London.' Jake hurried away as the little cluster of newspaper men came from the canteen and started over to where the plane was taxi-ing to a stop.

Sara counted the leaden minutes before the passengers could be disgorged; minutes not more leaden than her heart and limbs. Jake's words hung in the air that swirled about her; they pressed closer and closer until they beat against her like blows. She felt defenceless, and huddled inside her coat for warmth and comfort.

Inside the giant Clipper, Carter Reynolds waited quietly for the plane door to open. He was a fairly large man, fortyish, with a compact co-ordinated body. He moved easily and with purpose. His sandy hair was cut close to his head and his eyes were surprisingly blue. Like a child's.

But there was nothing child-like in the look that came from those eyes. It could be shrewd, friendly, humorous, outraged or compassionate. But never child-like. As a boy he had had a sprinkling of freckles and even now, in summer, a few persisted across the bridge of his strong, straight nose. He wore a grey flannel suit, a pale blue shirt and a dark blue tie. And yet, in spite of his not extraordinary good looks, his lack of originality in dress, his almost modest bearing, he could not fail but look distinguished.

If he was impatient at the plane's delay, he did not show it. And if he was disappointed when the door was finally opened and he stepped out on the runway, to see only Jake and a cluster of reporters, that disappointment was instantly masked by an easy smile. These newspaper boys had stood about in the fog and cold waiting for a plane four hours overdue. They mustn't be short-changed. He smiled as he held out his hand to Jake, and then waited to be introduced to the others.

Carter Reynolds had not come up the hard way and he was far too honest to pretend that he wished he had. He thought poverty deplorable and admired any man who sought either to avoid it or to escape from it. He never apologized for having been born with wealth, position and opportunity any more than he would have apologized for having been born with blue eyes. He was immensely grateful for all his privileges and used them to the hilt for purposes he believed in. Men with money liked him because he was one of them. Men without money liked him equally well because he did things with money which seemed to them both sensible and desirable.

And women liked him unreservedly. When he fell in love, it was something he did thoroughly. A woman had been heard to say that when Carter Reynolds made love, you didn't have to compete with a telephone or a ticker tape! He gave it his full attention. And he liked to be met half-way. Pursuit didn't amuse him and coquetry bored him. When a woman ran, he assumed she didn't want him. If so, he didn't want her. This assumption simplified life enormously. And he liked life to be simple. Complexity was for the

shallow mind and the restless heart. He had built his paper on his belief in simplicity. His instructions to his staff were always the same: 'Keep it clear. Keep it simple. Tell the facts. Tell the story. If it's true, don't dress it up. If it isn't true, don't tell it.' And it had paid off. It had bought him a successful life and a successful paper. And Sara. Only it hadn't *bought* Sara. A woman like Sara was always a gift. He found himself looking for her, straining to see over the heads of the eager men who thronged about him. Then he realized that Jake had seen that look and he felt the pressure of Jake's hand under his elbow and knew that he was moving in the right direction.

Sara saw the group coming and caught a glimpse of Reynolds's sandy head as he bent it a little to reply to a question being fired at him. It was a familiar, endearing gesture and quite unconscious, but it had won him countless friends; there was a deference, a courtesy in it; as if he felt that anything a man found worth saying he would find worth listening to.

And all at once Sara felt a surge of affection and a sense of enormous relief. She had nothing to fear! This was Carter, her friend. Her dear, good friend. When had he ever failed her? He would understand what she had to say before she could find the words with which to say it. She found herself moving towards him.

The newspaper men, as they caught sight of Sara, made room for her to join them and Reynolds stopped and took Sara by both shoulders and looked at her.

'Sara! I'd begun to think you were only a disembodied column.' Then he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. 'Well, what did they teach you in Sunday School?'

'To turn the other cheek,' said Sara, and suited the gesture to the words.

Then Reynolds tucked her hand firmly under his arm, as the group moved forward. 'Come along, Sara. Protect me from these colleagues of yours.'

'I say, Mr. Reynolds,' bandied one reporter, 'not hiding behind a woman's skirts?'

'Well, I can't think of any pleasanter protection,' was Reynolds's easy reply.

Jake watched and listened. He loved seeing the Boss in action. And these boys were eating it up. There was a smile of pure affection on Jake's face as Reynolds fended off more questions.

'Now, now, you lads mustn't fire so many questions at me. After all, I'm just a private citizen this trip——'

'Oh, come now, Mr. Reynolds,' broke in Ian, his fair face flushed and his youth out-weighting his discretion. 'We all know how difficult it is to get air passages these days——'

'That's right, sir,' added Eric. 'You must have come here for something.'

Reynolds stopped and faced the little group amiably. 'Look, I own a newspaper and I know just how much it means to get a juicy bit of news. When I said I was just a private citizen, that's what I was *told* to say. But I will have something for you by the end of the week. We'll meet at my hotel and have some drinks and I'll pass on to you whatever they let me pass on, while it's smoking hot. Okay?'

'Absolutely,' replied Ian, struck, as people always were, by Reynolds's simplicity and sincerity. His words were echoed by the others and Jake saw to it that they melted away at this psychologically good moment.

Left alone, Reynolds put his arms around Sara and gave her a long, hard kiss.

'There! That's what I came for—but I couldn't tell the boys!'

Sara was caught completely off-guard and her newly found composure dissolved. She plunged into a rush of words.

'Tell me about New York, Carter. I'm dying to hear all the news, all the gossip.' How's old Finley? And Mike? And Sally? I had to cut her recipe page out of the paper before I could read it. Made my mouth run like Niagara Falls! The food over here takes a bit of getting used to. But it's good for the figure.' Sara drew away from Reynolds as she said this and opened her fur coat. 'See how nice and thin I am. But I feel wonderful! And I've worked like a

fiend. Hasn't my column been good? I've had hundreds of letters about it. Simply hundreds!

Reynolds waited quietly until she had finished. And when he spoke, his voice was quiet, too. 'Finley is fine. Mike is fine. Sally is fine. And your column's fine. Now suppose you take a long breath and tell me what you've been up to.'

But, before Sara could reply, Jake came up. He took a quick, sidelong look at Sara's face before speaking to Reynolds.

'Why don't you and Sara have a cup of coffee in the canteen before we start back? It's a long drive in the black-out. And Sara's frozen, or ought to be.'

'Are you, Sara?' Reynolds asked.

'I'm pretty cold.'

'She's been standing around here since midnight.'

Reynolds's face was filled with quick compunction. 'Sara, my dear. If you've been here that long you need something stronger than coffee.' He turned to Jake. 'Thanks, Jake. Come along with us.'

'If you don't mind I'll have forty winks in the car.'

Sara looked after Jake's departing figure and was immeasurably grateful to him. He had given her a safe, impersonal background against which to say what had to be said. She had envisaged the dark intimacy of a car, making its cautious way back to London. Now, the thought of the bright, utilitarian canteen lessened her burden a little.

'Come on, Carter. We'll go into the canteen and have a drink—and a talk.'

'You talk, Sara. I'll listen. I've come a long way to do just exactly that.'

But when they sat at one of the metal-topped tables, their drinks in front of them, Sara found it impossible to begin. She groped in her purse for cigarettes, but Reynolds quickly brought out his own and held the packet out to Sara. She took one without speaking; then, before he could take out his lighter, flipped a match alight with her thumb-nail. A new gesture. One that didn't pass unnoticed by Reynolds.

Sara felt his awareness and paused, the lighted match half-way up to the cigarette held in her dry mouth. For a moment they looked at each other with the flame flickering between them. Then Sara lighted her cigarette and sucked the smoke deep down into her lungs, the way one breathes in an anæsthetic. Reynolds lighted a cigarette for himself before speaking.

'Look, Sara, why don't you pretend it's just a good news story? You know—who, when, where, what and why.'

Sara closed her eyes for a second, then started to speak rapidly before opening them again.

'His name is Mark Trevor. He's a B.B.C. newsreader and commentator. Overseas Services. He was a schoolmaster. Will be again. Read for an Honours Degree at Cambridge. I met him the week I landed. It—it hit me like an earthquake. Hit us both. The ground isn't steady under us yet!'

Sara saw that her cigarette had gone out while she spoke and ground the butt into an ashtray. Then she picked up her glass and finished her drink.

Reynolds reached across the table and touched Sara's hand. 'You're still pretty cold. Better have another.' He signalled the waitress who took his order for two fresh drinks. Then Reynolds turned back to Sara.

'That's a good first instalment. What comes next?'

'When this is all over, I want to marry him.'

'What is stopping you?'

'Because I felt I wasn't free. Because that last night in New York I said that when I came back, I'd marry you. Because I felt you had a claim on me—and I wanted everything to be honest and straight between us.'

'What does "us" mean?' Reynolds asked. 'You and Trevor? Or you and me?'

'All of us. All three of us.'

The waitress returned with the drinks and set them down. Sara half-pushed hers away from her.

'Drink it, Sara. You need it.' He added, as he picked up his own drink, 'And something tells me I'm going to need mine, too.'

Sara drank half of hers, obediently, although her eyes were on Reynolds. He held his drink in his hand as he returned her gaze.

'Let me get this clear, Sara. You're telling me that you don't mean to marry me. Is that it?'

Sara felt an obscure anger rising in her. 'Of course that's it! What do you think I've been trying to say?'

'Not a thing.' Reynolds swallowed his drink deliberately. 'Only that you met a guy who hit you like an earthquake. Not much of a foundation to build a marriage on—an earthquake. Pretty unstable, I should think.'

Sara had never seen him in quite this mood. As she looked at him she felt puzzled, unsure. 'You know, Carter, all the times I've rehearsed this, I never took into account the fact that you might be difficult. I counted on your understanding; on being able to come to you, openly and truthfully.' She added, defiance in her tone, 'After all, I didn't need to wait until I told you!'

'Did you, Sara? Did you wait?'

Sara flushed. 'I'm not married.'

Reynolds finished his drink, then put it down and the sound of the glass on the metal table made a hard little ring. He sat quietly, not looking at Sara. She could feel him assembling his thoughts, choosing his words. He had a delicacy of mind which made him sensitive to words and their meaning, real or implied, which was like an ear for music. He shied away from a false note. Sara had often seen his mind working like this in business conferences. Sometimes when millions were at stake. Sara wished she knew just how much was at stake now. Then Reynolds spoke, his voice threaded with anxiety and regret:

'I don't like this, Sara. I don't like it at all. Have you figured it out? Figured out what you are going to do to yourself? Give up everything you've worked for—everything you've sweated for? Bury yourself in a boys' prep school with all the little stinkies coming in on Sunday afternoons for tea? Be a house-mother for Britain's embryo heroes? Forget that you've made yourself a person?'

'I'll go any place he'll take me. And be glad of it. Oh,

Carter, don't think I haven't enjoyed what I've had—haven't appreciated it! But New York and clothes by the best dressmakers in the world and first nights and celebrities and excitement—they're not everything. Besides, I've had it. All of it. And stacked alongside the life Mark can offer me, it doesn't mean a thing. It's like a *soufflé*. It looks magnificent. But, after you've eaten it, you're still empty. I want peace and contentment and long days in the country and long evenings beside my own fire with the man who belongs there. *You'd* never want a life like that, Carter.'

Reynolds took both Sara's hands and gripping them in his, looked at her pityingly, tenderly. 'Nor do you! Sara, Sara, this is kid stuff. The little house with the picket fence around it and honeysuckle and roses and apple-blossoms growing over the door!'

'They don't all bloom at once,' Sara made herself say.

'They do in your imagination! That's what's wrong. It makes a pretty picture, but it's not for you, Sara. And this man . . .' Reynolds paused and held Sara's hands more closely for a moment. Then he smiled at her. A smile full of love. 'Not many men could take you for a steady diet, Sara. I can, because I love you. But, even after ten years, you spring surprises. Like this. Think what this poor bloke has got ahead of him in the way of surprises, after only six months! I'm tough. I can take it. But Trevor, he doesn't sound tough. Scholar, schoolmaster—he's not for you, Sara. I know that without seeing him.'

'He's what I want.'

'That's not the same thing, Sara. Not at all the same thing.' Then he saw the painful, stubborn lines in Sara's face, tense under his probing and he longed to be silent. To let her make her mistake in peace. But he couldn't. He made his voice gentle. Persuasive.

'It doesn't belong in the pattern of your life. It's an alien note. Worse! It's backing your life up. This is schoolgirl love, Sara. The kind of love you didn't have time for when you were a schoolgirl. You were too ambitious, too determined to get ahead, and you toughened your heart

against it. I can still see you as you were that first day you came into my office; a stringy kid, all eye and guts.'

'I was nineteen.'

'You're still nineteen, in a lot of ways. Your heart hasn't caught up with your brain. Look, Sara, think back. When you went to school, did the boy next door ever walk home with you and carry your books and buy you a soda?'

'I didn't like the boy next door.'

'It's a pity. You should have got him out of your system then. There was a place for that boy in your life. Then you met Trevor and he filled that place.'

'Only now he doesn't buy me a soda. It's tea out of a tin cup, or a drink of neat whisky on a wet night. And the walk home is past bomb craters and air-raid shelters. Quite a difference.'

'Yes,' replied Reynolds. 'Quite a difference. The other was safe.'

Sara's voice was contemptuous. 'Who wants to be safe?'

'Every woman in the world, I should think,' was Reynolds's reply. 'Particularly when it comes to love.'

But Sara only repeated stubbornly, 'He's what I want. And I'm what he wants. We belong together.'

'Like ham and eggs?'

Sara smiled. 'That's it. Like ham and eggs.'

Reynolds pushed his chair away from the table. 'Let's get out of here.'

Jake sat wide awake in the back of the limousine parked outside. The ashtray was overflowing with cigarette butts and Jake's head was thick from smoke and lack of sleep. But he couldn't relax. Not with both Sara and the Boss in trouble. Divided allegiance is a painful emotion and it was new to Jake.

Then he saw Sara and Reynolds walking towards him and got out of the car and told the chauffeur to warm up the engine. As he watched their approach, they stopped, just out of ear-shot.

Reynolds hadn't spoken since they left the canteen. Now

he spoke abruptly. 'Do you know, Sara, I think I see now why you put off, time after time, saying you'd marry me in spite of all the years we've been together.'

Sara waited for him to continue with an unaccustomed impassivity. Reynolds went on, rushing his words a little. 'Because there was a gap in your emotional life. An experience you should have had and missed. Unfinished business.' He looked at Sara as if hoping she would break in; give some indication that she understood what he was trying to drive home. But she kept her strange silence. Then, with the first hint of persuasion in his voice that Sara had ever heard, he added, 'First love doesn't always come first. It is not a matter of time, but of quality.'

If Sara was touched by this faint, so unfamiliar, note of pleading, she concealed it. 'I can't pick my love apart, dissect it, like that. First love, last love, what does it matter? All I know is——'

Reynolds finished the sentence for her. 'All you know is that you want to marry him.'

'Yes,' said Sara. 'Yes, that is what I want.'

'Well, then, you're free to do it, Sara. Free as far as I'm concerned.'

Sara was puzzled by this. 'But, who else?'

'There's yourself. That woman known as Sara Scott, America's most brilliant columnist. You've still got *her* to deal with, and she won't let you off as easily as I have done. Don't forget, I helped to make her!'

'You know I'm grateful.'

Reynolds's voice was grim. 'You won't be, by the time she gets through with you! I know that Sara Scott as well as I know the back of my hand. She'll make you wish you'd never been born!'

CHAPTER V

SARA sat quietly in her corner of the car while Jake and Reynolds talked about *The Ledger* and the war and the world.

When Jake had seen the expression on Sara's face as she got in the car he had been prepared to make conversation all the way to London. But Reynolds saved him the trouble. The brisk questions, the eager interest, the quick perception were all there. He seemed unaware of Sara's presence next to him. But when the car swerved a little on the wet road and the rug slipped from Sara's knees, in a gesture so unconscious and so accustomed that he didn't pause in speaking nor turn his head towards her, Reynolds reached for the rug and drew it up over Sara and held it against her body.

And under the warmth of his protecting hand, Sara remembered his words of warning, and the unfamiliar note of griminess of his voice. 'That woman, Sara Scott . . . still got her to deal with . . . won't let you off as easily as I have done . . . I know that Sara Scott as well as I know the back of my hand!'

Sara answered him protestingly in her mind. Who could know her better than she knew herself? And as the long, dark miles stretched ahead, Sara's thoughts sped back. Back to the days when she had been little Sally Scott in a hand-embroidered dress; patched and darned and faded, but hand-embroidered. A mark of the gentility Sara had come to despise. She despised the struggle, not to achieve, but to survive; and to survive in a pattern of fixed sterility. To hold what one had, even if what one had was already worthless. To preserve the form, although the form was only a shell, housing emptiness. Poverty and vulgarity would have mattered less to Sara than this heroic effort to preserve the unheroic. The effort which had coloured her childhood and distorted her girlhood. The effort from which she still shrank in loathing.

The only child of an only child, Sara had grown up in a small New England town around which a factory was already throwing its wreath of smoke. Her father had died when she was seven but, from her own loving memory of him and the photographs her mother kept displayed, even after her second marriage, Sara had retained an almost unbearably clear picture of him.

Tall, gaunt, with dark red hair and high cheek-bones which set off the brilliant hazel eyes which Sara had inherited, he had the austere mind and the passionate heart of a Highland Scot. His parents had emigrated to Canada and he himself had been born there. Then he, in turn, had emigrated to Massachusetts where, having survived thirty bitter Canadian winters, he was to die of pneumonia in a mild New England spring. But not before he had set the imprint of his personality on a small newspaper he owned and ran and through which he preached his gospel, the fiery spirit of John Knox burning in him.

Small as she had been when she had lost him, Sara had already spent long afternoons in her father's office, happily breathing in the dusty air and the imperishable smell of printer's ink, as she watched him furiously frowning and pounding out his editorials on a rickety typewriter. This method of writing maddened him, but no one could decipher his impetuous hand, and when he felt with particular vehemence, he would strike the keys with such violence that the type very nearly tore through the paper. Thus would he drive his words home!

Years later, when Sara's small effects were sent to her in New York, the books had been wrapped in old, yellowed newspapers. Sara had very nearly thrown them out when the name on a headline had caught her eye. *The Clarion*. Her father's paper! It was like a trumpet call from the past. Frantically she had searched through them in the hope of finding the editorials, and was rewarded by half a dozen. She had smoothed out the crumpled pages so that they could be read, devouring every line, and marvelled at the wisdom and prescience of his words; and wept afresh as she realized what she had lost. Her early grief had been that of a child for a lost father; now she grieved, not for herself and the fine companion she might have had, but for the impoverished world which could ill afford to lose such a man. When she had finished reading, she had carefully folded the editorials and put them away in a box and thought it was like filling another grave.

After her father's death, Sara and her mother moved from the little house they had lived in and went to the large, old house of her mother's parents. Sara always remembered the morning they left the house in which she had been born, and the lilacs growing by the door and how their sweet, dewy blossoms had brushed her bare arms as she went past them for the last time.

Sara had hated her grandparents' house with its air of shabby magnificence; paint peeling from the great porticoes, sagging steps leading up to the front door with its beautifully polished brass knocker. Anything which took money to repair, remained unrepaired; but what old hands could accomplish, with only time and effort, was accomplished. Inside, the house was filled with fine furniture; chairs, too fragile to sit on, covered in faded silks and frayed embroidery; delicate lace curtains at the long windows, with patches of exquisite darning flying like birds through the sheer net; carpets worn to a shadow of their design; scanty food served on fine silver, and the table covered with linen, patched and mended until it had taken on a geometric pattern of its own. And on everything the bloom of decay, like fuzz on a summer peach.

Sara had spent her sensitive years in this house, growing to loathe everything old, everything which spelled 'yesterday', the word for ever on her grandparents' lips. Everything had been better 'yesterday'. The world had been filled with leisure and peopled by ladies and gentlemen. Sara could picture them, seated in a simpering row, drinking tea from cracked china cups. And she yearned, like a drunkard, for to-morrow.

Her grandparents hadn't approved of their daughter's marriage to gaunt Andrew Scott. They had wanted their loved and only child to marry someone whose family they had always known; someone safe like Alvin, who had always loved her. Later, Sara learned to be grateful to them that they were so gentle and kind to her for, with her father's face and eyes, she must have been a painful presence. But, if she was, they never showed it. They would have adored a little grandchild who was like their own child, whom they adored. Sara's mother could do no wrong. Not that she

would ever have been guilty of anything so positive as wrongdoing. She had a pastel beauty of face and mind, and was incapable of decisive action; a quality which was beyond Sara's understanding, even as a child. Not that Sara hadn't loved her mother, but it had been with a fierce, impatient love. And when her mother finally married Alvin, with his safe job and his steadfast affection, Sara didn't feel the usual childish jealousy. She realized, obscurely, how well they were suited to each other with their love of dullness in its carefully polished frame.

A moment before the actual wedding, Sara's mother had swept her into an embrace and whispered, 'Don't feel bad, Sara pet; this would have made your Papa happy. He'd be glad to know I was safe.'

And all through the ceremony Sara had felt her father's approving presence; and yet, under that approval, the fine scorn he had for safety. 'Who wants to be safe?' he used to say. 'Life! That's the thing!'

Sara was to live with her mother when she came back from the honeymoon and she counted the days before she could leave the old house with its withered life. She had learned to love her grandparents and kissed them good-bye with a pang of regret that she had not loved them more; but she was never to recover from that scent of delicate decay which had so offended her childish nostrils. Later she came to appreciate fine old wood; to savour its depth and gloss; to run her fingers over its shining patina, but it never touched the inner core of her feeling. She always loved the sight and smell of a stack of raw, yellow lumber, ready for to-morrow.

Life under Alvin's roof had taken on the same colour, housed the same genteel struggle, to which Sara had become accustomed; only on what seemed to her a more humiliating scale. For where everyone had known that only her grandparents' annuity kept their patched roof over their heads, now elaborate deceptions must be planned and practised to safeguard Alvin's position at the Bank; which word Sara could never in all her life hear spoken without seeing it spelt with a large, capital B.

But Alvin, with his long, pallid face and his reticent smile, was a mountain of inarticulate kindness to Sara. And if she knew his limitations, she also knew that they were those of capacity and not of quality.

And Sara's mother blossomed under his tender love. blooming to be cut short by a belated effort to give Alvin the son he longed for; an effort which cost him the lives of both.

Sara had grieved for her mother, but she had grieved even more for Alvin, who had been shattered by his loss and clung to the fourteen-year-old Sara for solace.

Sara had done her best to comfort him and, as the months went by, she was lost in wonder at the vitality of her mother's memory. She had seemed, even to Sara's affectionate eyes, ineffectual and negative; lacking in any positive quality. But Sara was to learn, and learn painfully, that she had possessed one priceless gift; the power to make a man feel strong. By her very dependence and fragility, she had augmented Alvin's strength. Without her, he paled and diminished. His delicate, inbred New England bones seemed to attenuate and become brittle, while the lantern jaw which had lent his face shy humour now curved and lengthened until he had the melancholy look of a lonely hound.

He even lost interest in his work at the Bank and, by the time Sara had finished high school, the youngest student in her class, she had made up her mind that she could no longer be a burden on him and his slender savings.

But at the very mention of her leaving him, Alvin had gone into a state of pathetic panic. She was his cherished link with her mother, and Sara sought about frantically in her mind for some solution. And found one. Her grandparents. They had loved Alvin as a son and he could take her mother's place as she herself never could. They had lost a daughter. Alvin had lost a wife. They should console each other.

Barely sixteen, thin and tense from the combined effort of keeping house for Alvin and the school-work which she had attacked with such desperation, Sara made an odd and touching picture of maternal solicitude when she went to her grandparents and asked them to take care of Alvin.

Dismayed at Sara's determination to make her own way, they agreed, and Sara went home to tell Alvin the news and pack him up, encouraging and comforting him, and thinking to herself, it was like sending a child away to school.

Then she had delivered him to the old house, where the only thriving thing was the mortgage, and set her face towards New York and the newspaper job which was her goal. But not before one last gesture from Alvin which brought her close to tears. Fifty dollars to be tucked away in her purse for safe keeping. Sara hadn't wanted to take it but Alvin had said he wouldn't be able to sleep at night unless he knew that Sara had something extra, for an emergency.

Had he only known it, Alvin had given Sara something more than fifty dollars: he had given her additional pride and courage, for Sara made up her mind that she would never use the money. To draw on Alvin would be an acceptance of failure. And fired by her father's memory, Sara burned for success; for all the things he should have had and missed; for rewarding work; for passionate accomplishment. And, above all, for that magnificent, pungent, risky undertaking: Life.

Those first years in New York. 1932 to 1935. The depression years. Grim, hazardous, frightening. But, after the suffocating restrictions of her upbringing, they had been like a great sweep of gusty air, and Sara had filled her lungs with it and breathed it in and, with it, freedom and reality and the scent of battle.

Whenever Sara tried to add up all the jobs she had held to earn a precarious living, she always felt she missed one or two somewhere along the line. Usherette, waitress, sales girl in a department store, cigarette girl in a speak-easy, a dispenser of orange juice at five cents a drink, her hands always filled with sticky nickels and sticky glasses: a domestic in exchange for her room and board, and the chance to go to night school; addressing envelopes in her father's same impetuous hand; and typing manuscripts on a rented machine — manuscripts she couldn't resist editing, to the authors' fury. In retrospect, they turned into a kaleidoscopic blur of time

and sequence, but the things she heard and saw, the conditions under which she lived, and the women she worked with, women of every age, religion and colour, these remained in her mind with biting clarity. And she was storing up a bank account on which she would draw all the years of her life.

By 1935 Sara was nineteen. Conditions were better, but not enough better to change materially Sara's living problems. On every side there was change. Nazi-ism had risen in Germany, Fascism in Italy. And America had entered into her 'initial' era with W.P.A.'s and F.H.A.'s and C.C.C.'s springing up like summer corn. And a myriad more to come.

Sara had begun to despair of ever getting out of the class of itinerant labour, although she read the want ads until they marched in printed columns through her head. She had made no permanent friends, for her jobs shifted too frequently, and after lonely days, her evenings were spent in public libraries and her Sundays in public parks. Books, books and more books were her food and her mind matured and she began to think angrily about the world and its problems. But a newspaper job, her first dream, seemed as far away as when she had first come to New York, although she read the papers avidly and was rarely too poor to buy one.

In those days the newspapers had been full of predictions and pronouncements. Everyone either thought, or spoke without thinking. Sara never opened a paper without seeing: "HOOVER SAYS, ROOSEVELT SAYS, 'HITLER SAYS, PEGLER SAYS, MUSSOLINI SAYS, RUSSIA SAYS; but, apart from Roosevelt, none of it seemed to make much sense to Sara, or to solve the real problems which beset the men and women she had laboured and sweated with. And so, on one wet Sunday when her bench in the park was unthinkable, Sara, in a fine burst of anger, had started writing letters, headed SARA SCOTT SAYS, and sent them to *The Ledger*. She chose *The Ledger* because she liked its editorials. And, partly from her father's old writings, but a good deal from her own observation and experience, Sara managed to say a few cogent and indignant truths.

Jake, who was City Editor at the time, read them, first with amusement at the impertinence of them, and then with growing interest. This dame had something. He couldn't do anything about the letters. They were dynamite, even for the liberal *Ledger*. But he wondered how long this Sara Scott could keep them up, under her own steam. And, sure enough, suddenly the letters stopped, and Jake guessed that Sara Scott had had her say. Too bad. *The Ledger* might have found a place for her. Not that Jake thought much of dames on a paper, but the Boss was always looking for fresh talent. Jake put the few letters in a drawer regretfully. One of these flash-in-a-pan dames; no staying power.

Sara's letters to *The Ledger* had stopped because the 'flu had downed even her indignation. For three weeks she had lain, alone and unattended, in her third-floor room, living on canned milk and canned soup and biscuits and coffee. Now her money was gone, and her rent was owing and the black day had finally come when she must use Alvin's fifty dollars. She turned her face to the wall and thought, this is the end. I have failed. Then there had been a knock at the door and Sara automatically reached under her pillow, where she kept the money, for she felt certain it must be the collector calling once again for the rent.

But, when the door opened, Sara saw the kindest, ugliest face she had ever looked upon. And Jake saw a thin, white-faced youngster, half-sitting up in bed, with a shabby purse in her hand.

'Hello, kid, is your mother home?' Jake had asked.

And Sara had astonished them both by bursting into tears.

An hour later, refreshed by two hot hamburgers and a carton of coffee which Jake had promptly gone after, Sara learned that a note from *The Ledger*, asking her to call, had lain for a week on the littered hall-table downstairs. Jake had continued to be puzzled by Sara's letters and he hadn't been able to reconcile their conflicting, yet oddly harmonious elements. And he couldn't work out her age. She knew too much about things which had happened twenty years ago to be a kid; yet she seemed so in tune with the times.

This puzzle had been easily solved by Sara's showing Jake her father's old editorials, and as she watched him read the crumpled pages and saw the response and admiration in his face, she knew that, at last, she had found a friend. By the time Jake took his leave, she had also found a job. And the column, destined to become famous as SARA SCOTT SAYS, was born.

The door was about to close behind Jake when Sara suddenly called him back, and asked him if he'd wait and post a letter for her. Hastily scribbling a note and addressing an envelope, she took Alvin's fifty dollars, which left her purse empty, and put it in the envelope. Jake watched her curiously. 'I thought you were broke,' he said.

Sara told him about Alvin's money and the promise she had made to herself.

'Don't be in such a hurry to send it back, kid; you may need it,' Jake had warned.

But Sara had shaken her head. 'I've got a job on a paper. I'm where I belong. I'll never need it now.'

And Jake believed her.

That had been the beginning of an entirely new world for Sara. Jake had shown her off to the Boss with pride in his find, and Sara had walked into Carter Reynolds's office, and into his life, 'a stringy kid, all eyes and guts', as he had remembered her.

Sara was shaken out of the memory of her first meeting with Reynolds by the slowing of the car as it nosed into the kerb; but before she dismissed her thoughts, she finished the protesting answer of her mind: Reynolds might have helped make Sara Scott, but he couldn't know all the things which had gone into her own share of the making. She could deal with that Sara Scott, as she had dealt with everything else in her life. And if the woman she had created proved an obstacle to her happiness, she would destroy her!

The car stopped and Sara felt Reynolds's hand on her arm. What a kind hand it was! She turned to him impulsively.

'Carter, have dinner with us to-morrow night—I mean, to-night,' she amended as she saw the light streaking the sky above the chimney pots. 'I want you to meet Mark. I want you to like him.'

Jake listened and thought to himself: 'That's asking for it.' And waited for Reynolds's reply.

'Thanks, Sara. I was hoping you'd ask me.'

Jake grinned. 'And that's taking it.' Then, as Reynolds helped Sara out of the car, Jake remembered Sara's words earlier in the evening: 'Win, lose or draw,' and wondered which one he'd put his money on, Reynolds or Sara; and then thought, 'There I go, back to the old question-answer game.'

But he continued to wonder as he and Reynolds drove back to their hotel in silence.

CHAPTER VI

SARA had seen the dawn of a day which turned out to be like spring. The fog had vanished and now, in the soft dusk of early evening, Mark turned in at No. 11 South Street and reached into his pocket for his key, then he waited before putting it in the lock, as if to savour the moment to come. Returning to Sara was always like this: it brought a quickening of the heart and, at the same time, an ease of tension. It was as if all the varying rhythms of his mind and body were suddenly integrated into one harmoniously beating pulse, like the vibration of a perfectly tuned motor. All through the cold night at the docks, while Mark waited for the convoy to come in, Sara had been background music, keeping him warm. And she had deepened his sense of identity until he was never so completely himself as when he was with her. She held the key, as he held this one in his hand.

Putting the key in the lock, Mark swung the door open and, as he heard soft music, he felt for a moment as if he had conjured it out of the air by his own thoughts of Sara. Then he smiled at his fancy as he realized it was Sara's wireless, and

started up the stairs towards the light and the warmth he k
were waiting.

As she heard his step on the stairs, Sara gave the room one last, quick look before opening the door. A table, candle-lighted; a Martini in a crystal mixer, ready for the ice; *pâté* in its shining yellow terrine; the fire burning brightly and, everywhere, bowls of crisp spring flowers: hyacinths, tulips, freesias, daffodils and violets filled the room with their early sweetness.

As Sara surveyed the room she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the fireplace. She stopped, then came closer to her reflection. Never a vain woman, Sara looked at herself critically; simple, midnight-blue dinner dress, a string of pearls close about her throat, a sapphire bracelet, no rings. Her face was flushed under the faint tan of her skin, and the pupils of her hazel eyes were dark and brilliant. Suddenly, she smiled at her reflection; a smile, like the flowers which breathed gently in the room, full of hope and sweetness. Then she went to the door.

Sara's hand closed on the knob of the door at the same instant as Mark's, from the other side. For a moment the door made a barrier between them through which Sara could sense but not see him. It was an oddly uncomfortable sensation, quickly swept aside and forgotten, as Sara released her hold on the knob and moved back for Mark to come in.

As he threw down his raincoat, without which Sara felt no Englishman ever faced any sort of weather, she saw that he had found time to change into a dark suit which made him look thinner and more intense; and younger. Sara wondered suddenly, irrelevantly, how old he was. She had never asked, fearing obscurely that it might be less than her own twenty-nine years. And Reynolds's words again came back to her: 'He's the boy you should have known when you were sixteen; there was a place in your life for that boy.' She thought now, with exultation, 'If there was, I've found him; and with him, my own lost youth. My own lost innocence.'

'Alone?' Mark asked as he turned to her. And then, as his glance about the room told him that she was, he came close to her and put his arms about her, slowly, as if every degree of the embrace held its own pleasure. 'I was afraid that what's-his-name would be here—Carter Reynolds—'

He finished his words with a kiss. And another. And another. And Sara thought, 'I was foolish. I shouldn't have said we'd meet Carter. We should have stayed here, alone. To-night, more than any other night.'

But she spoke and said, 'He's meeting us at the Fleur de Lys.' Then, only half-moving within his embrace, she made a vague gesture towards the table. 'I thought we'd have a drink here first. There's something I want to say to you.'

Mark, struck by an odd tone in her voice, released her to step back and look at her. 'Important?'

'Probably the most important thing I shall ever say in all my life.'

And, as she spoke, she moved over to the table to cover her inner excitement and started putting ice into the cocktail mixer. Mark watched her, a deep uneasiness rising in him, which the soft music of the wireless only enhanced. He tried to keep his voice steady as he asked, 'What is it? You're not going away? You're not going to leave me?'

Sara's hands trembled at the panic in his voice, but she made herself finish putting ice into the Martini, as she said,

'Why do you ask that?'

'Because I've been afraid this Reynolds chap would lure you back to your job—back to the land of three-inch steaks, and safety.'

Sara smiled. 'It's the other way round. I'm *never* going to leave you!' As she said these words, her breath caught a little as if the very thought of never being separated from Mark was too much happiness to be borne. She crossed to him. 'I think I want you to put your arms about me and hold me very close, while I say this.'

As Mark held her, the music changed to a dance tune and Sara swayed a little in his arms. 'Remember the first time we danced to that?' Almost unthinkingly they danced a

few steps, Sara easily, gracefully and Mark clumsily, in an abstracted manner. Sara laughed. 'You're a dreadful dancer! That's one of the things which endear you to me.'

'Because I tread on your feet?'

'Because you're content to do unimportant things badly. Most of the men I know pride themselves on putting in a rough day in Wall Street and putting on a smooth rhumba at night!'

Sara stopped dancing abruptly as the knowledge swept over her of how far removed Mark was from the life she had known. 'Oh, Mark, I wish you *had* carried my books home from school! I wish you had been the boy next door, and bought me soda at the drug-store!'

Mark stared at her. 'Books from school? Boy next door? Drug store? I'm in a bit of a fog——'

But Sara rushed on. 'I wish I'd shared every moment of your life! I hate every year, every month, every day, we didn't know each other!'

Mark's voice hardened a little. 'I like it this way. New, different, exciting.' He kissed her with unaccustomed roughness. 'Now then, what's that important something you wanted to say?'

Sara, in spite of all her years of fluency, found herself groping for words. They came slowly, almost painfully. 'I was going to lead up to it so carefully, so delicately; but it's hard for me to unlock my heart. I grew up in a tough, slick world. A world where you weep if you pick the wrong hat—and laugh if you pick the wrong guy. A world where sentiment is a song you sing, and jeer at afterwards. A song where "dear" rhymes with "fear"—and "heart" with "part".'

Sara paused for a steadying breath. 'You know, Mark, in all the months we've been together, I've never mentioned marriage. Never let you mention it.'

Mark's face took on a secret, veiled look. 'I thought marriage didn't fit in your plans, with your job.'

'It didn't, until I met you. And I wasn't free.'

'You mean——'

'Oh, I wasn't married. But I had made a promise.'

'Carter Reynolds?'

'He's been asking me to marry him ever since I can remember. He's been enormously, unforgettably kind to me and I'm fond of him. Very fond. He kept on trying to convince me that it was love I felt—and so, finally, I told him that when I came back I'd marry him. That was six months ago.'

'And that's why he flew over. To see what had happened to your promise.'

'And to me. I told him about us, Mark. That's why I went to meet his plane last night: to tell him, and to ask him to release me from my promise.'

'Did he? Did he release you, Sara?'

'Of course. He wants my happiness. He's that kind of man.'

'I'm not that kind of man. I wouldn't want your happiness, if it took you away from me.'

'As if anything could! Oh, Mark, don't you see, there's nothing to keep us apart now; nothing to prevent our marrying, and spending the rest of our lives together!'

As Sara looked up, her eyes burning with happiness, a look of inexpressible sadness came into Mark's face. He closed his eyes for a second as if to shut out the vision of what their lives together might have been. Now it had happened. It was no longer any good saying, 'take one day at a time'. There wouldn't be any more days. Not like those which were past. And he felt, with a sense of shocked grievance, how, without warning, it had come in the delicate dusk of this spring evening when he was so warm and tender with happiness. So vulnerable. When he opened his eyes and spoke, his voice was curiously gentle. 'But there is, Sara. There is something to keep us apart.'

'But I told you—I'm free.'

'I'm not.' And as Sara stared at him blankly, incredulously, he continued speaking quietly, standing quietly, like a man who realizes that he is reading his own death sentence; and yet reads on.

'I have a wife.'

Sara, for the first time in her life, was devastated by emotion. She stood, shattered and shaken by rage, humilia-

tion and, above all else, blinding jealousy of that other, unknown woman. For a moment she could only stammer broken phrases, her beautifully articulated mind failing her utterly. It was as if time had whirled back with sickening speed and stripped her of all she had learned; stripped her of her treasures bought at such a price: her treasures of pride and dignity and self-respect.

'But why, why did you never tell me? Why keep me in ignorance of anything so important? Why let me humiliate myself like this?'

'Because marriage never entered into our talk, Sara. You just said that, yourself.'

'Because I kept it out! I did! Not you!'

She put a shaking hand up to her hair and pushed it back from her damp and pallid face with an unfamiliar, distraught gesture. 'And if you have a wife, why isn't she here with you? Why isn't she sharing your life, as I'm sharing it?'

'Because of Brian. My son.'

'Your son! She has that, too!'

'He was only five when I came to London. And he'd been ill.'

Sara drew a deep, sobbing breath. It was becoming unbearable to Mark to see her like this. The music played on, sweet and sinuous. Mark moved abruptly and turned it off and his eye fell on the Martini, waiting in its frosty mixer. He quickly poured two drinks, taking one for himself and putting the other into Sara's hand. She took it obediently and stood as if she didn't know that she was holding the icy glass; as if her hand and her heart and her brain were numb. And when she spoke, it was as if she were talking in her sleep.

'I thought our love was so open, so honest. No secrets. No locked doors. And all the while you had this knowledge. This guilty knowledge.'

Mark tried to keep his voice gentle. 'But, Sara, you just said that you, yourself, were not free.'

Sara made a blind, protesting gesture with her hand, unaware that the drink was in it, and the liquid spilled over her

hand and ran down her dress, as she cried out, 'But mine was only a *promise*! A promise ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have ignored. But I wanted everything to be straight between us. I thought you were so truthful, so honourable. I was bending over backward to meet truth with truth, and honour with honour!'

While Sara spoke, Mark took his handkerchief and wiped Sara's hands and her dress and put the empty glass on the table. Then he waited for Sara to finish speaking. And when she had, she stood as still as marble and the tears began to fill her eyes and run down her cheeks and she made no move to check their flow.

Sara had known plenty of other women who had let themselves become involved with married men. Some of these intimacies had been on the highest level of feeling. Sara had liked and respected both the men and the women. But she had always known, at the same time, that this sort of thing was not for her. The New England ancestry of her mother and the Scotch Presbyterianism of her father had united in her blood and made such a relationship repugnant on the grounds of taste alone. And now she found herself that shabby, anomalous creature: the other woman. The proud love she had so cherished was no longer proud. It had become debased.

Mark took both her cold hands in his. 'Come and sit down beside me, Sara. Let's face this the way we've faced everything. Our work, our lives, our love for each other.' He added gently, 'It is love, Sara.'

As Mark led Sara to the sofa by the fire, he felt that he must restore her to some semblance of herself. Reach the fine, clear mind he had always thought was under such discipline, and not at the mercy of her woman's nerves and heart. He spoke to her quietly and reasonably, and all the while the tears ran down Sara's cold cheeks and she made no effort to free her hands and wipe them away and it made her seem strangely defenceless. But Mark, through love and pity and guilt, forced himself to go on speaking.

'Try to see it, for just one moment, from my side. I was

just a young schoolmaster down in Cornwall when the war flung me into this broadcasting business because of a speech I'd made at the end of term. The father of one of the boys was important in the B.B.C. and made a place for me. It was the only war work I could do and I fairly jumped at the chance. The only drawback was that my—my wife would have to stay down in Cornwall. It's a long journey up to London in peace-time and practically impossible now. We'd never been separated and I spent a pretty lonely time.'

Mark's words, 'We'd never been separated', rang in Sara's mind like a bell.

'The girl you grew up with. The girl that, in my stupid love, I wanted to be!'

But she spoke in the shadow of a voice and Mark went on, feeling in spite of himself that an almost intolerable burden was being lifted from him. He breathed more easily; the tightness in his chest was less suffocating. And he held Sara's hands still more closely as he said, 'And then I met the great Sara Scott. That extraordinary woman who tells millions of other women how to run their lives; how to discipline their emotions; how to take their place in this world of men. How to think like men. To open the windows of their minds to a world which is not built around the personal. I needn't tell you what that meeting did to me. You know. And how could I suppose that you would take the fact of my marriage like this? Sara, I even thought you *knew*. Thought that was why, with your delicacy of mind, you avoided the subject of marriage. *Because* you knew. And accepted it.'

'I wouldn't have spent five minutes with you, if I had,' Sara answered in a voice so exhausted with grief that the words fell from her lips in single drops, like the tears which were still running down her cheeks and falling on her hands and on Mark's, and trickling in little salty rivulets between their fingers.

'Everything I have believed in has failed me. Everything I built my life on. I thought I had made my foundations so solid, but now they're rocking under me.'

Sara wrenched her hands away and got to her feet as she finished speaking and stood, swaying a little, as if the ground were actually unsteady beneath her. Then another thought came to her mind to torture her, and with her hands clenched tightly at her sides and her mouth trembling, she turned to Mark. 'Those—those reports you're always writing! They're letters to *her*—to your wife! Aren't they? Aren't they?'

Mark was taken completely off guard and his revealing face was answer enough. Sara shuddered and seemed to shrink within herself. All her intelligence had fallen by the wayside and she was, for this moment, every outraged woman in the world. She had loved. She had been deceived. There was no room in her crowded heart for any other emotion. 'All the time you're with me, you're thinking of her! Planning what to say to her, what to write to her! Then, your duty done, you come back to me! That—that makes it all positively *indecent*!'

She turned away from Mark with a gesture of revulsion so violent that she stumbled against the table, sending Mark's pipe-rack to the floor where the pipes spilled out with a fearful clatter. Sara knelt and tried to gather them up; tried by this commonplace gesture to restore some sense of order to her shattered mind and nerves, but she was weeping wildly now; weeping with sorrow and shock and rage at herself; rage and shame that she should have fallen a victim to this unbridled, degrading emotion.

Mark, his own emotion almost beyond control, crossed over to her and took her by the shoulders and raised her to her feet. Then, still gripping her with bruising fingers, almost shaking her, he spoke in a voice so harsh that he scarcely knew it for his own. 'Stop it! Stop it, Sara! You're not the only one who's suffering! You've only had this knowledge for a few minutes. I've had it for six months. I walk with it and talk with it and live with it! I go to sleep with it, and I wake up with it! It hasn't been pleasant. But you've had what you have called happiness. And, she—well, she's had peace of mind. Both of those things seemed rather

important to me. And if you could control yourself for a moment, you might agree with me!

Sara stopped weeping and her sobbing breath quieted. She looked up into Mark's face in wonder at the unaccustomed harshness of his voice and saw the suffering in his eyes and the lines of pain about his mouth. He said nothing but held her in that painful grip. Then the silence between them was broken by the sound of a car as it stopped noisily outside.

'That's the car I ordered,' Sara heard herself say.

Mark's hands released her. 'I'll cancel it.' He had already moved towards the door when Sara stopped him.

'Why?' she asked.

Mark stopped and looked at her. 'You can't mean you're going?'

Sara's head came up in its old gesture of indomitable will and pride. 'Do you think I'd let Carter know what's happened? Of course I'm going!' Then, as Mark hesitated, she added, 'If you'd rather not—'

'Don't be an idiot!' He started towards the door. 'Shall I tell him ten minutes?'

'Five,' said Sara, as she went towards her bedroom, already taking the pins out of her hair. This was battle and she would, somehow, be equal to it!

CHAPTER VII

CARTER REYNOLDS got out of the top-heavy London cab in front of the Fleur de Lys in a state of uncomfortably jumbled emotions. He wanted *not* to like Mark, yet he knew in his bones that Sara was incapable of a breach of taste in the placing of her love. Still, he argued, taste was one thing, and judgment another. Sara had always had judgment as well, but this time—he pushed the doubt aside, as he pushed aside the black-out curtain which guarded the entrance to the restaurant.

For a moment, the light hit his eyes and as he stood, glancing about for Sara, it was easy for Mark to identify him. He stepped over. 'You're Carter Reynolds, aren't you?'

His unexpected voice made Reynolds turn sharply and the man he had been trying to picture in his mind was brought into startlingly close focus, so that his first impression was vivid and intimate.

'I'm Mark Trevor,' Mark went on in what he hoped was an impersonal voice. 'Sara'll be along in a moment; she's having the maid do something or other to her dress.'

Reynolds rested his eyes on Mark for a second before he spoke. He took in the lean face with its fine bones; the dark, almost black hair and the intense, faintly foreign look which so many Cornishmen seem to have. It wasn't at all the sort of face Reynolds had expected. He had looked for the fair, schoolboy type of Englishman with shy, awkward manners and a hint of adolescent charm. But there was character in this face, and a kind of forced maturity. And there was more than a hint of something else; something which had left pain in the dark, deep-set eyes and put lines of strain about the mobile mouth. It was not a schoolmaster's face, either; at least, not as Reynolds knew them. They might be different here in England. It was in some ways a monastic face, but that of a monk who struggled against the flesh and found a constant penance in the keeping of his vows.

Reynolds held out his hand. 'I've heard about you. Heard a good deal, as a matter of fact.'

Mark's face grew wary as the two men shook hands, but Reynolds continued in his urbane, experienced voice, 'You seem to have achieved a lot of popularity. By your broadcasts, I mean.'

'Thank you,' said Mark. 'They seem to like them here.'

'They like them at home, too. It's not easy for an Englishman to tell the truth to North and South America, and still make friends.' He offered his cigarette case to Mark as he spoke. 'Cigarette?'

'Thank you.' Mark took one and reached into his pocket for a box of matches, then lit one with his thumb-nail. Reynolds was quick to remember the gesture, but accepted the light and went on speaking, guiding the talk into safe channels.

'Your people here seem to be very broad-minded about

censorship; at least, the Americans who broadcast from here find it so.

‘That’s because, we let your broadcasters, and you have some jolly good ones, send out items for us which are really trial balloons. That is, the Americans open up certain topics and we listen for overseas reactions. If they’re good, we take over and enlarge on them. And we interchange propaganda which builds national pride, on both sides. On the whole, I think we’re of some help to each other.’

‘Better than that. You handle a delicate job extremely well.’ Reynolds paused, then added without any change of inflection, ‘Sara tells me that you were a schoolmaster.’

Mark’s face and voice were instantly defensive and Reynolds thought, ‘Good Lord, but he’s sensitive! He needs an extra layer of skin.’

‘I taught small boys in a big school,’ Mark replied stiffly.

‘That doesn’t make it a small job,’ replied Reynolds, with a smile. ‘What was your special subject?’

‘A combined course: history with a dash of world geography,’ answered Mark, torn between pride and reticence. ‘It was an idea of my own. I rather thought that one made little sense without the other.’

This said, Mark lapsed into silence and Reynolds looked at him with a sympathy he hadn’t expected to feel.

‘Ever think of working on a paper? That broadcast style of yours might make good reading.’

‘I haven’t thought much of anything beyond getting out of this all in one piece.’

‘Well, if you ever do think about it, look me up. I like bright young men. Sometimes I can help them.’

‘It’s very good of you, but I don’t need any help.’

A less experienced man, a less sensitive man, than Reynolds might have suspected rudeness. But Reynolds knew better. He smiled slowly and his voice was almost indolent as he replied, ‘Now, that’s odd. I’ve found that I’ve needed help at almost every stage of my life. Of course, if you have that dedicated feeling about teaching, and heaven knows the world can use good teachers, that’s different.’

'Very. And, Mr. Reynolds, I wish you'd stop trying to put me at my ease. It's making me uncomfortable as hell!'

Before Reynolds could reply, Sara came towards them from the powder room and as Mark saw her and smiled, Reynolds was acutely aware of the sudden *charade* which must have laid waste Sara's defences. And he felt helpless and, for the first time in his life, a little alarmed.

'Carter, I'm so sorry I'm late!' Sara held her hand out to Reynolds as she spoke. 'I had to repair some damage. The hem of my skirt.'

Sara had changed from her tear-stained dress to a brown moire suit which brought a breath of autumn into the spring evening, and the whisper of leaves in a November wind. She had covered her shining hair with a small hat which cast a protecting shadow over her already shadowed eyes; and, by some miracle of will and courage, looked almost as if she had not just sustained a devastating blow. To anyone but Reynolds. He felt a little shiver pass over him as he looked at her.

'Haven't you two had a drink?' Sara asked as she looked, smiling, from one to the other.

'We waited for you,' said Reynolds.

'Heavens! You must be perishing! We'll have them at the table.' And Sara turned quickly and led the way to the softly lighted restaurant below, grateful to escape from the bright *foyer*.

And the two men followed her, each possessed by his own emotion: Mark, astonished that Sara was able to face up to this meeting, and Reynolds wondering what the next hour would bring.

★ ★ ★

The Fleur de Lys was known as the gayest restaurant in London. Once inside its doors the war could almost be forgotten. Not entirely, for at least eighty per cent of the men were in uniform of one sort or another. But an excellent orchestra played dance music and champagne was opened with such regularity that the popping of the corks made a pleasant staccato music of its own.

But, in spite of the lights and the music and the laughter which burst like bubbles, Reynolds felt there was the smell of death in the air. It was the uniforms, he reasoned with himself. The unconscious knowledge that those gleaming buttons and badges, those rows of gay ribbons, were destined to be dulled by dirt and blood. And the women who danced and smiled and wore bright dresses over their scented bodies, they must, all of them, have suffered their bitter losses and be wearing mourning in their hearts.

But, even as he reasoned, he knew it was something else; something more personal, which gave him this sense of bereavement. One of them, one of the three who sat at this corner table surrounded by mirrors, was doomed to suffer a loss.

He saw his own face reflected darkly. Was this impending sorrow destined for him? Was he going to lose Sara? This was an old fear. He had lived with it for ten years. But it touched him now with a cold hand.

Or Mark Trevor? Was this grief which hung in the air like smoke, going to touch him? As he looked at Mark's mirrored profile he felt once again that sense of a forced, hot-house growth, as if a passion had ripened too quickly and drawn too deeply on the body which nurtured it.

And Sara. If this shadow which he felt hovering over them was to dim her bright beauty and he was to stand by helpless and watch it happen—the thought hit him like a blow and he felt as if his lungs had just sucked in a breath of icy air. This was a *new* fear and he closed the door on it and became once more aware of Sara's voice.

They were half-way through dinner by now and well into their third bottle of champagne, Sara drinking a good deal more than her share. And she was afraid to stop talking. Afraid of what a moment's silence might reveal.

'You don't know what goes on here in the way of courage,' Sara was saying. 'The stories of bombed-out London will go down in history. Remember the one, Mark, about the old woman who was dug out of the wreckage of her home, and one of the firemen, seeing a little bottle of brandy in what

was left of her cupboard, started to give her some. But what do you think she did? She screamed bloody murder and said, "old on there! I'm savin' that, for an h'emergency!"

Sara laughed as she finished and held her glass out to Reynolds to refill. He hesitated for a moment, but she had turned towards Mark and gone on talking, her voice strained and breathless. Reynolds filled the glass and wondered how long she could keep this up.

'Mark,' Sara was saying, 'tell Carter the one about that other old woman you interviewed. You know, the one whose son was in the Army—'

'Oh yes,' Mark took his cue. 'She was one of those magnificent, battered old ladies, something like our Mrs. Bunker.' He quickly covered his slip by adding, flushing a little, 'Sara's char.' Then hurried on. 'I asked her about herself, how many times she'd been bombed out—I think it was four!—and if she had any children. She said she had one. I asked where he was and she fairly spat the answer at me. "Where do you suppose 'e is? In the Army, the dirty coward!"'

Sara cut in before Reynolds could make any comment. 'Then Mark went back to write his broadcast and he was bombed out! And we all went and got tight!'

Sara reached for her glass as she finished, but Reynolds put his hand quietly over hers. 'And you're on the verge of getting tight now, Sara—in case you haven't noticed.'

Reynolds kept his steady hand over Sara's fluttering one and looked from her to Mark, and back again. Then he made his voice very deliberate and matter-of-fact. 'Look, it's time somebody stopped acting, and it had better be me. Would it help any, Sara, if I told you that I know Trevor is married?'

Sara's hand grew still and cold. Her eyes sought Mark's, whose own had darkened with shock and anger.

'Don't you think you might have chosen a better place to say that?' he asked Reynolds.

'No. Sara never made a scene in public in her life.'

'Who told you—about Mark?' Sara managed to ask, drawing her hand away.

'You forget it's my job to know things. I made a few inquiries after I left you. Inquiries you could have made months ago, if you'd had sense enough to do it. Or Jake.'

'Jake wouldn't spy on me!'

'Jake isn't in love with you,' was Reynolds's calm reply. Then he turned to Mark. 'I'm not criticizing you for not having told Sara. I might have done the same thing if I'd met Sara when I was your age, and in your situation.'

'That's very handsome of you.'

'No. Not handsome. Only fair.' He leaned across the table and looked at both of them earnestly, searchingly, before he went on speaking. 'And I want you both to be equally fair, and listen to what I have to say. You won't like it, but I want you to listen. I'm older than either of you. I know more. I've made more mistakes. *This is a mistake.*'

'As a mere matter of inquiry, how does it feel to know so much?' Mark asked, his voice bitter.

'Very unpleasant,' was Reynolds's quiet reply. Where another man might have resented Mark's voice and manner, Reynolds knew it was because he was confused and unhappy, very young and, perhaps, a little frightened. 'And I'm not labelling this a mistake on, shall we say, ethical grounds. That part rests between you and whatever you believe in. No, this is a mistake because of the essential character of the two people involved. There are people who thrive on intrigue; it seasons life for them; but Sara isn't one of them. And I don't think you are.'

'I don't want to be rude, Mr. Reynolds, but I don't give a damn what you think of me!'

'That's good. Because what I think isn't going to make any difference. It's what Sara thinks.'

Mark pushed his chair back and his voice was tight with anger. 'Then perhaps you'd better stay here and find out. You're a clever fellow, Mr. Reynolds. A sort of one-man Brains Trust. You and that newspaper you own with its clever slogan, "The Paper That Wakes You Up." Perhaps

you can wake us up. We're walking about in a nightmare and it would be quite a pleasure to wake up. And perhaps you can discover what Sara thinks. I don't know. And Sara doesn't know. But *you'll* know. And when you've settled our lives for us, perhaps *you'll* let us know!

Mark rose abruptly as he finished speaking and turned to Sara. 'Sorry, Sara—but I've had all I can manage in one go. But I love you. Don't forget that, no matter what they print in the papers!'

He left without another word and Reynolds watched him thread his way across the crowded dance floor and could read rage and guilt and misery in the very set of his young shoulders. Reynolds didn't feel entirely free from guilt himself, and Sara's white face was poor comfort for what he had felt compelled to do. But he liked Mark for his angry outburst; liked him for the look of desperate unhappiness on his face and for the blazing pain in his eyes when he turned them to Sara; for Reynolds knew, with a surge of relief, that she hadn't thrown her love away.

* * *

Mark left the restaurant behind him and walked the streets with great, sweeping steps, yet felt that he was motionless: that he was rooted to the ground while faces, pale in the warm, dusky air, moved past him like faces floating in a dream. And all the emotions which Reynolds had sensed were bubbling in his brain: misery and rage and guilt. Like sweating wrestlers, they struggled for first place, only to become an entangled, writhing mass until Mark could not tell where one ended or another began. He only knew that his love for Sara was greater than any of the emotions which beset him, and the misery was part of the love. The rage and the guilt were for himself; although part of the rage was for Reynolds, whose face rose up before him, as if in answer to his name.

Mark saw again that short, sandy hair, the fine-textured, almost rosy skin, those astonishingly blue eyes; and the intense look of youth and harnessed vigour—as if, having

brought him to a point of happy maturity, time had stayed its hand.

Reynolds was not only considerably younger than Mark had imagined, but considerably more attractive. He wondered Sara hadn't mentioned this; then realized that Reynolds's achievements were greater than his charm, and would be thought of first. Mark had had little experience with Americans, beyond Jake and Sara, and Reynolds didn't fit into either category. He found himself remembering Sara's brief description: tough, but in a very smooth way. But even in his anger, Mark knew there was a good deal more to Reynolds than qualities of toughness and smoothness. And he loved Sara. A blind man could see that. But he forced himself to admit that Reynolds had been decent in revealing his knowledge of Mark's marriage to both of them. He could so easily have told Sara when they were alone, and coloured the telling by spoken, and unspoken, criticism. But he hadn't. He had just leaned across the table and, as the Americans say, handed it to them, in that pleasant, urbane voice, as simply as passing olives on a plate. And his look seemed to say, 'I didn't order these, but they're here; we'd better have them.' And under the knowledge of this fairness, some of the anger began to recede, and guilt took its place. Guilt for having loved Sara; guilt for having left her; and guilt for having betrayed Kay.

As the name 'Kay' formed in his mind and on his lips, he realized with sickening clarity that the future he had so longed to see was now unrolling in front of him. A future which could hold Sara, or Kay. It was like being asked, 'Which hand do you want? Your right hand or your left?' And going through life minus one of them. His very flesh quivered as he suffered the shock of amputation and felt himself maimed.

He recoiled from this picture of himself and tried to soften his sense of guilt. He had not injured Kay. He had not robbed her. For what he had given Sara was a passion he hadn't known he possessed. The years he had spent with Kay were intact; complete, and unaltered. There was no

relation between that life and this. 'No relation between what he felt for Sara and what he felt for Kay. But even as he justified his conduct to Kay, justified the untarnished love he still bore her, he looked up and saw that his feet had carried him to Sara's door!

He stood staring at No. 11 South Street. A number on a house. A house in a street. One of a million houses in a million streets. Would he ever go through that door again? Was he shut out from Sara's house, and Sara's heart? Were they to be locked and bolted against him? And he cried out in protest: 'Sara! Sara! Don't leave me!' Yet even as he said the words, he knew he had no right to utter them. 'His honour rooted in dishonour stood, and faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.' This echo from his boyhood, these magic words which had once held such magic dreams, rose up and struck him in the face like a dash of bitter spray from the Cornish sea, and left him gasping.

He turned blindly away and went down the street which led to his hotel, his official London home.

Reynolds had kept Sara in the restaurant, kept her surrounded by the safe, impersonal crowd, and talked about everything in the world, except Mark. New York, the paper, the people they knew, the places they'd visited; Sara's job, his own job; travel, food, books and music. And the theatre. Reynolds was an avid theatre-goer and a delight to actors, for he sensed and understood their finely balanced mixture of ego and humility. There'd been a good crop of plays during Sara's absence and Reynolds ran through them all, remembering telling lines and striking bits of business. *Antigone*, with Katherine Cornell's exquisite integrity; *Fredrie March*, warmly human in *A Bell for Adano*; Laurette Taylor shedding magic on *The Glass Menagerie*. And as Reynolds talked he watched Sara draw on her deep, inner reserves of strength and pride until the tension eased in her body and her eyes lost a little of their grief. Reynolds relaxed a little himself, and when he came to *Home of the*

Brave, one of the plays he had liked best, he remembered the two touching lines of verse from it and, laying his hand open on the table next to Sara's, he repeated them to her: 'Someone must make a stand: Coward, take my coward's hand', and Sara put her hand in his and spoke for the first time since Mark had left them.

'Oh, Carter, what am I to do?'

'You've been playing house, Sara. It's time to pack up and come home.'

'Leave Mark?'

'A clean break. Now.'

'Are you sure you're a good judge, Carter? It might be that you're jealous.'

'You bet I'm jealous! I could cut his heart out. But that's not why I'm telling you to come home.'

Sara dropped her eyes. 'I'm sorry. That wasn't fair.'

'Forget it. No one's fair when they feel as you do. Least of all to themselves. Sara, this kind of thing is no good for decent people. And Trevor's a decent guy. And you, well, you know what I think about you. You're honest to the backbone.'

'Backbone!' Sara smiled shakily. 'I haven't even got one! Not since——'

'When did you find out, Sara?'

'Just before I met you here. I had asked him to marry me.' A deep blush burned through the pallor of her face, but she faced Reynolds as she made herself say the humiliating words.

'You were magnificent. You would have fooled anyone but me. But you never lied to me, Sara. Not in all the years I've known you.'

'I never tried.'

Reynolds tightened his hold on Sara's hand as he talked swiftly, eagerly. 'I'm going back on the Clipper next week, but I'll pull all the strings I know and get out sooner—if you'll go with me. Put distance between you and this man. Between you and this love. Before it messes up your life.'

'Maybe it won't mess up my life. After all, I'm not a

child. I'm supposed to be an experienced woman of the world; a woman with a career, with an adult point of view.'

'Yes, you're supposed to be all those things, Sara. But you're also something else. Something much more important. You're a woman in love. That's a tough handicap.'

'Why? I thought love made everything easy.'

'Not when you have to share a man with another woman.'

The words hurt, as Reynolds had known they would, and Sara stiffened a little as she managed a wry smile: 'You mean, I'm second best?'

'When there are two women in a man's life—*both* are second best.'

Reynolds watched Sara as he finished speaking and saw the idea, which he had clothed with words, sink into her consciousness the way a lead plummet sinks into the sea; and he knew, like a plummet, it would keep on sinking until it found its depth and came to rest. And when that happened, Sara would know what it was she had to do.

Reynolds turned and signalled the waiter to bring his check. He knew it was time to go.

★ ★ ★

Seated beside Sara in the taxi as it moved slowly and cautiously along the dark streets, Reynolds matched her silence with his own. Only when the cab pulled up at No. 11 South Street and Reynolds helped her out, did he speak.

'Once back in New York this will all be a dream. You'll have your job, your friends; the people who admire you, the people who love you. Even my presence may help a little.'

Sara put a quick hand on his arm. 'Oh, Carter, you make me feel such a stinker!'

Reynolds smiled. This was better. 'That's a healthy emotion,' he said. They walked to the house as he spoke and then Sara hesitated, standing at the door with the key in her hand. Reynolds spoke quickly.

'I won't come up, if you don't mind, Sara. This has been quite an evening for me, too.'

He took her hand and she turned to him a face of such astringent sorrow that he found himself speaking once more of Mark, when he had meant to keep silent. 'You'll be able to handle this, Sara. You know what to do.'

'Will I, Carter? Will I?' Sara asked, with desperation in her voice and in the hand which clung to his.

Reynolds made his voice light to cover the emotion which suddenly trembled in him. 'Come now, where's that indomitable spirit which has reduced strong men to jelly?'

'I'm trying to find it. Perhaps I will have, by morning.'

She drew her hand away and, thrusting the key into the lock, went into the house and the door closed behind her.

And Reynolds stood staring at this door as Mark had done, only one short hour before. But without longing; without desire. And he indulged in no imaginings. It was a door he never wanted to open; a threshold he never wanted to cross. He was tough, but he knew the limits to his toughness, and his bones turned to water at the thought of walking up those stairs and into that flat where the very walls would be permeated with Sara's intimate joy and Sara's bitter grief. This was one door he was grateful to have closed, and he crossed to the waiting taxi without a backward look.

Big Ben struck one o'clock and Reynolds gave up trying to sleep as a bad job. He had thought a stiff double whisky would do the trick but it had only stimulated his mind. Throwing back the bed-clothes he walked over to the windows and opened them to the dark night, and the dark river that moved slowly to the sea. The city was still and motionless; no moon to guide the bombers, though an occasional searchlight swept across the sky and fell for an illuminating moment on the Thames, that river which has been called liquid history. And his thoughts went to Mark and he wondered if he, too, were sitting up awake in this large, silent city. Nice, nice guy. And going through hell with

his conscience, if Reynolds knew the signs. No wonder he'd been bowled over by Sara. After all, Reynolds had been a seasoned man of the world, and Sara had bowled him over. Made him break a life-long rule: never have anything to do with a woman who works for you. Only he'd never really felt that Sara worked for him; not in the definition of depending on him, or on his job. She had given a sense of performing her work in a fleeting way, like a wild bird; shy, wary, yet fearless; and always ready to take wing and fly.

It was a warm, muggy night and his thoughts began to drift. He was immeasurably grateful that Sara had already learned about Mark's marriage, before he himself had revealed it. He'd felt like a dirty dog when Jake had come back to his room with him, the night before.

'My time's going to be pretty short here, Jake,' he had begun. 'Suppose you give me a line on the gang; you know, the boys you've been going around with.' And as he caught Jake's shrewd eye, he had added, casually he hoped, 'I've been thinking, it might be a good idea to enlarge *The Ledger* office here; put on a few more boys. And I think it might be tactful to have an Englishman. One who likes Americans, of course.'

'Does he have to be a newspaper man?' Jake had asked.

'Well, that or one of the allied arts, shall we say.'

'You wouldn't mean a broadcaster, would you?'

'Broadcasting is one of the allied arts, isn't it?' Reynolds had replied, pulling his shirt off over his head. Then, as his face emerged, adding, 'You wouldn't have anyone in mind, would you? Anyone special?'

'Pretty special,' Jake had said, keeping the casual tone.

Then, with all the diplomacy taken care of, Reynolds had, to his own surprise, burst out with, 'God damn it, Jake, how did she meet that guy?'

'Removing an unexploded bomb.'

'And it went off!'

'No,' said Jake. Then he'd looked at Reynolds's face. 'Oh, I see what you mean. Yeah, it went off. With a bang.'

'That's a hell of a beginning.'
'That's what I thought,' said Jake.

Well that was done. The curtain was down on Act One. Now his thoughts went back to Sara. Ten years of his life were bound up with her. Ten good years. He remembered again the first day he had seen her and how he had been captivated by her lack of pretence, her quite extraordinary beauty of bone and spirit, her fierce independence. Her zest for life which excited her, even while it bruised her. He wanted Sara's love as he had never wanted anything before; but he knew he would have to win it. It wasn't anyone's for the asking. Or for the taking, either. It had to be bestowed. And so he had made his way slowly. He knew their life together must not start until she herself was a celebrity and would have the pride and dignity of choice. When that time came, there wasn't a newspaper in the country which wouldn't have taken her, and when she chose to remain with Reynolds, he had felt that both he and his paper were honoured.

Memory of that early happiness poured over him and he felt submerged and defeated; and knew again that strange sense of bereavement. What was happening to them? Where were they moving? And towards what?

And he envied the dark river because it knew its destination. He turned away from the window and left the river to continue its inevitable journey to the sea.

CHAPTER VIII

LIKE the river, the night flowed darkly on for Sara, who lay, sandy-eyed, and listened to the ticking of the clock to which her heart beat a laboured *obbligato*. Everything seemed to have slowed down. Even the urgency had gone from her emotion. And the tears had gone, leaving the stone of her grief worn smooth. No sharp edges to cut and wound; just a heavy, dull mass as formless as clods of earth thrown on a coffin.

She asked herself, was this what all her struggle had led to? Was this the destination of all the dark and dusty roads? The purpose of her painful youth, and her mature accomplishment? To find Mark, and to lose him?

The clock ticked on, and Sara's mind swung like a pendulum to the day she had found him. The day they had found each other.

Jake had told her, during what she had thought was to be her brief stay in London, about the removal of an unexploded bomb. She had thought it would make a good story for her column. Jake, regretting his impulse almost before he had spoken, had stationed her next to a B.B.C. commentator who was making a wire recording on the spot. And the commentator had been Mark.

No one introduced them. No one had told her his name. She only knew that, kneeling by his side in the dust and rubble, seeing his dark, averted profile and his lean, brown hands holding the mike, the purely physical excitement of his presence was so great that it drove out all fear of the hazardous job on which they were engaged.

Then Jake had called out to her; it was time they pushed off. She'd got enough for her story. And Mark had become aware of her for the first time. He turned his eyes to her and his lids had quickly and protectively veiled whatever look they might have revealed, and when he spoke there was a rough edge to the soft Cornish burr of his ordinary speech.

'I don't want any women here,' he had said.

Sara had not intended remaining, until Mark had spoken and looked at her. Then she knew she couldn't leave. 'I'm not a woman. I'm a reporter,' she had replied. Then, turning to Jake who stood uneasily by, aware that some sort of unscheduled explosion had taken place, she had said, 'I'm staying, Jake.'

'I don't want you taking risks like this. Don't you realize what might happen?'

'Yes,' Sara had said, her eyes on Mark.

Jake had seen this but went on stubbornly: 'You might get

blown up. And the Boss wouldn't like that. The paper's got an investment in you. You spell circulation.'

Mark had turned back to his wire recording of the bomb removal just as if Sara weren't there; and she had listened to Mark's voice, and not to Jake's, who had gone on talking. What persuasions he had tried, she never heard. She only knew that he had stopped and was looking at her as if his last words had been a question, and Sara had repeated, 'I'm staying, Jake.' And Jake had turned away unhappily.

It had taken hours to remove the bomb and Sara watched the casual, dangerous work, breathless with admiration and wonder. The berets of the Royal Engineers were like mushrooms in a field of rubble. The commands and instructions were clipped and quiet with, now and then, a little bark of laughter. The whole area had been roped off and Sara felt as if she and Mark were existing in an oasis of peril.

Mark had never looked at her again but the very posture of his body spelled anger and alarm. At least, Sara had been able to so interpret it, later.

And so it went on, hour after hour; as matter-of-fact as digging a stone out of a rose garden. No anxieties, no complaints, unless you counted the man who grumbled because they weren't stopping for tea.

Then, quite suddenly, in the most commonplace sort of way, it was over. The bomb was made safe, dug up, hoisted out, and carted away. Sara, her limbs cramped, had suddenly shivered with cold, and delayed nerves. And Mark had reached into the pocket of his raincoat and pulled out a flask. Without turning, he handed it to her, as if the shivering of her body had communicated itself to his.

Sara had taken the flask and unscrewed the top and gratefully swallowed some of the biting whisky. When she had handed it back, Mark, without wiping it, had put his mouth deliberately where her lips had been and drunk, never taking his eyes from hers. And it was a kiss.

Sara had a confused recollection of getting to her feet and stumbling through the rubble to the pavement, where she had been able to hail a cab. But, with her hand on the door, she

had felt Mark beside her. She had turned and, trying to seem casual, as if merely offering a war-time courtesy, said, 'I'll drop you off. Where are you going?

'With you,' was his reply; and Sara had barely been able to give her address to the driver.

He had said nothing to her in the cab. Had not looked at her. Had not touched her. But the air surrounding them beat as if with a pulse.

When they had arrived at No. 11 South Street, Mark had paid the driver while Sara, strangely clumsy, had tried to put her key into the lock. As the cab had driven away, Mark had come to her side and taken the key out of her hand and opened the door. She had felt his body trembling next to hers. And when he had held the key out for Sara to take back, she had closed his fingers over it, giving it all, irrevocably, from the first moment. With the key in his hand, he had followed her up the stairs. And there had been no words between them until she found herself lying in his arms.

From the first moment, Sara could not believe that there had ever been any other man; or that, with Mark, there had ever been any other woman. It was like a birth; as if the union of their bodies had produced a passion, freshly minted and gleaming with newness. And it had never ceased to be so. Always that leaping desire. Always that sense of the first time.

Not that Sara had ever actually believed that Mark had been inexperienced; but she had dismissed whatever might have gone before under the vague, enveloping term of 'women'; shadowy creatures who barely emerged from the dusky recesses of her imagination.

But a wife. A woman. One special woman who had shared his life. By whose side he had slept. By whom he had had a child. Only in this moment of misery which seeped into her very bones did she admit to herself how her body had clamoured for a child. Her body which would now be for ever barren.

Never in all the months which had passed since their wild, precipitant love had Sara felt that she owed any explanation,

any apology to herself or to Mark. It had all seemed so right, so inescapable. And an odd sense of innocence had persisted in all they had done, kept alive by the ever-increasing freshness of their union, the ever-renewed excitement of discovery. But, lying alone in the dark, she made herself realize that when Mark had taken her in that first, blind, wordless moment, he had belonged to another woman. And only now did she feel violated. As if she had lost her virginity of the heart and mind.

* * *

The dark hours wore on. The clock beat out the minutes and, when the wind blew from the river, the ghostly, distant tone of Big Ben struck the hours.

Sara, deserted by her abundant vitality, lay quietly and felt as if her life were running out, like sand in an hour-glass. Grain by grain, she felt herself diminished; her arms, lying limp by her sides, were powerless, and strength oozed from her finger-tips.

And, like the reprise of a song, the words rang in her mind: 'Leave Mark. Come home. Make a clean break.'

A clean break, she repeated to herself. That's what they had called it when she had broken her arm. She could hear the doctor saying approvingly, as if she had done it that way specially, 'Well, now—that's what I call a nice, clean break. We can put that together again; make it as good as new.'

But could this break with Mark be a clean one? No jagged bits, no missing pieces? Could she put her life together again, as easily as they had done her arm? Make it as good as new?

Then oddly, almost ludicrously, these words spoken to herself, sent her mind swinging back to funny little Mrs. Bunker and her solemn query: 'Did you ever try to unscramble an egg, madam? That's what a man does to your life.'

And, running like a hound on the heels of this question, came another, more frightening one: was she going to have to live up to everything she had preached? Had her life

become like a problem in geometry, where it wasn't enough to state the truth; you must prove it?

The sweat poured from Sara's body and she lay bathed in fear. And she longed suddenly for the limpid days of her childhood and the touch of her father's impetuous hand and the pungent courage of his speech.

Yet even as she longed for it, she could hear his voice, hot and scornful, as he quoted his favourite philosophy, 'which she had made her own:

All these years you have read and trained and prepared yourself.

Now come into the conflict. Enter the arena and show us what you have learned.

The hour of struggle is come. The Olympic contest is here.

One day, and one action will discover what you are.

Remember, Life is what you were training for, all along!

Sara let these words take possession of her. She faced their truth and their stern wisdom. Over and over again she said them to herself, using them to whip up her pride, her courage and her self-respect. . . . Enter the arena . . . show what you have learned . . . the hour of struggle . . . one day and one action . . . one action will prove . . . what you have learned . . . what you are . . . what you are . . .

She struggled to restore her mind to order, as one puts a room to rights when a storm has shattered the windows and entered the house.

And by the time the first light came palely through the curtains, Sara faced it, calm and resolute, and rose to meet the day.

Moving in ordered steps, she bathed, dressed, brushed her shining hair, put on her make-up with a steady hand. There was almost a sense of ritual in her movements, deliberate and unhurried.

A green knitted dress, suede pumps and beret, a sable scarf, and she was ready to go, save for her purse and gloves. She

methodically selected matching ones from her dressing-table and, without another look in the mirror, turned away and left the room.

CHAPTER IX

SOUTH STREET was empty, save for an occasional early servant coming to work, when Sara walked with a measured step down the quiet street, across Berkeley Square and into the deserted lobby of Mark's hotel. Then, up the narrow staircase, and down the narrow hall, still as a tomb, until she knocked at his door. There was no reply. She waited for a moment, then turned the knob and found the door unlocked and walked into the sitting-room of Mark's suite.

The room had a bleak, unlivid-in look, but the electric lights were on and the door leading to the adjoining room was partly open. Sara called Mark's name, then walked into the bedroom where she could hear the water running in the shower. His bed had not been opened but the cover and pillows were tumbled as if Mark had vainly sought a few hours' sleep.

Sara crossed to the bathroom door and knocked, and Mark's voice came through, blurred by the sound of the shower.

'Who is it?'

'Sara,' she replied.

'Who?' he asked. 'I can't hear over the shower.'

Sara moved closer to the door so that she leaned, with her cheek against the wood, as she spoke. 'Turn the shower off. It's I—Sara. I must speak to you.'

The rush of water diminished, then ceased. Still pressed against the door, Sara went on speaking, her voice quiet and detached.

'What I have to say can be said through the door. I have lain awake all night, trying to see my way clear. And now I see it. I am going home, Mark. Back to New York. I'm going to pick up my life and try to put it together again. We must break this off now, without seeing each other again or causing each other further pain. After all, it's only been

six months of our lives. Let it be forgotten; the way, in time, a death is forgotten.'

The words had been said slowly, not a tremor in her voice, not a pulse of emotion. It was as if the power to feel had been drained away; as blood is drained from a corpse.

Then the door from the bathroom opened abruptly and Mark stood in the doorway. His face was pale and glistening with water, and his black hair was like a wet cap, giving his head a stern, sculptured look. A dark terry-cloth robe was wrapped tightly about him.

They stood for a breathless second, then moved towards each other so swiftly, so blindly, that it was impossible to know who took the first step; and Mark held her in his arms so closely that Sara felt as if his body would melt into hers.

Long, wordless minutes passed; then Mark kissed her gently and spoke to her in broken whispers, and Sara could only rest in his arms, conscious of his cold, wet cheek pressed to hers, the drops of water like tears, and the hard outlines of his body which she could feel damply through the robe.

'Sara, Sara!' Even if I'd told you in the beginning, what good would it have done? You know how it happened with us: there wasn't time to speak—there wasn't time to think. Never before like that with me. Or with you. I knew that.'

He kissed her lips in between the words; tender, comforting kisses. 'Don't you see, my sweet, my darling love, no matter how soon I had spoken, it was already too late!'

Sara gave a deep, despairing sigh for answer and continued to lie against him. Her hour of struggle had come and gone. Victory or defeat, she only knew that she was alive again and that the blood coursed through her once more. And Mark felt her body grow warm in his arms.

Barely moving his lips from her mouth, he added, 'All I could have done was to have made you share my guilt.'

Sara raised her face to speak when there was a rap on the sitting-room door, followed by the soft clatter of china.

'It's the waiter, bringing tea,' Mark said, as Sara moved away from him.

'This early!'

'I've a job of work down on the south coast.'

'Don't go,' Sara said impulsively. 'Not to-day.'

'I must.'

Sara looked at his reluctant face. 'Yes. Yes, you're right. Let us, at least, keep the integrity of our work.'

She turned towards the sitting-room. 'I'll have the waiter bring another cup. I could do with some tea.'

When Sara got into the sitting-room she saw that the elderly waiter had tea service for two.

'There're two cups already,' she called out to Mark.

'One's for Ian. He's meeting me here. Driving me down.'

Sara turned to the waiter. 'Bring a third cup, will you? And another pot of tea. Very strong.'

The door closed behind him and Sara stood for a moment, while Mark dressed in the next room. The sky had grown overcast and the rain began to slap dully against the dirty windows. The room looked even more homeless. Sara began to move restlessly about. She still felt the shock of the interrupted embrace. She paused by one of the windows and looked out and spoke, half to herself. 'I don't think I can ever bear to look at rain again.'

'We had some happy times in the rain,' Mark's voice answered her from the adjoining room.

'Yes. I know.'

Mark came in from the bedroom, dressed in shirt and trousers, his tie in his hand.

'We can be happy again, Sara—if you'll let us.'

The door from the hall opened quietly and fresh tea and another cup were laid on the table, but Sara remained at the window, watching the rain making patterns on the dust.

'Better have your tea.'

'Yes,' said Sara and turned obediently away from the window and started to pour tea for both of them, while Mark knotted his tie in front of the mirror over the fireplace.

Sara paused suddenly, the tea-pot in her hand. 'I feel like a character in one of those drawing-room plays. You

know—Lady Audrey has just learned that Lord Leslie's heart belongs to another, yet she smiles and says, "Will you have cream and sugar in your tea?"

'You know already.'

'It's all I do know. That you have milk and one sugar in tea. Two sugars and no milk in coffee. You eat too quickly, sleep too little, work too hard. You never wear gloves, vests or woollen socks. You like steak, Scotch and stout, for the last of which, may Heaven forgive you!'

And, while she spoke, she carefully and methodically poured the tea and added the proper amounts of milk and sugar. And her voice went on as quietly as if she were reading from a catalogue.

'You hate red finger-nails, hard-boiled eggs and after-shaving lotion. Your favourite authors are Montaigne, Emerson—and A. P. Herbert. You like the music of Mozart because it bubbles—like champagne. You don't like champagne.'

Sara carried his cup of tea over to Mark, who took it from her and tried to keep his voice light as he replied: 'That's quite a lot to know. You make it sound like one of those profile things in a magazine: sleeps in a double bed with all the windows open.'

'It's not enough!' Sara cried out sharply. 'It's not the whole man.'

She picked up her own cup with a shaking hand and took two or three swallows of the scalding tea. Then spoke as if the words were forced from her. 'All those other years!'

'And those other years of yours, Sara?'

'They didn't count! But *yours*! Can you say yours didn't?'

Mark put his cup down and walked over to Sara and put his hands on her shoulders and held her so that she was compelled to look into his face as he spoke. 'Would you like that? Would you like me to say that a woman who married me, and a child who belongs to me, don't count? Is that the kind of man you could love, Sara?'

'How long would you have gone on, not letting me know?'

Mark's hands dropped from her shoulders. 'I took one day at a time. And it was worth it. Up to now.' He looked at Sara's white face, a look of compassion and remorse. 'That look on your face. It's not very pleasant to know I put it there.'

'I'm sorry.'

'That's worse! What have you to be sorry for?'

Sara spoke slowly, almost humbly. 'For my impetuous love. My romantic heart. And the unhappiness they have brought you.'

She stood, her head a little bowed, as she finished speaking, the whole posture of her body infinitely touching.

'Sara, my dear, my dear! Don't be sorry, ever! I wasn't complete until I knew you!'

Her humility reached out and engulfed him and he said over and over to himself. 'I should have told you! I should have told you! Even though it would have been too late, I should have told you!'

Then Sara remembered and spoke slowly: 'You said you thought I already knew.'

Mark turned and flung his hands out in a gesture of despair. 'Perhaps I lied. Perhaps I didn't think you knew. Perhaps I only wanted to think it. I'm just a *man*, Sara!'

He crossed over to her and stood very close, but not touching her, and his voice softened and became reasonable. 'We met here in this fantastic time and our love made a little island. I thought this was a part of our lives no one could touch. I wanted to build a wall around us because, from the moment you put your hand in mine, I loved you. Does that make you very angry, Sara?'

Sara shook her head and turned and laid her cheek against his shoulder. And as Mark put his arms about her, the thought that she might not leave him, the hope of capturing once more their lost delights, brought urgency back into his voice. 'Can't we forget all this, just for now? After all, we're in the middle of a war. Neither of us may come out of this alive!'

'Go on, as before?'

'We can still keep that wall around our lives!'

Sara moved away. 'You know what that means, Mark. You're asking me to take second best.'

The urgency in Mark's voice gave way to anger. 'First best—second best! They're only words! And who knows, which is which?'

'You should know, Mark! One of us comes first. You must know which one!'

'Why? Why must I? I tell you, my life has been cut in two! How do I know to which half I belong?' He took hold of Sara roughly. 'All I know is that I love you—now—to-day! Isn't that enough? Can't you stop torturing to-morrow?'

Sara, held so close that she could feel his dry, hot breath, looked up into the face which had never failed to move her. She saw, with quick compassion, the strained muscles of his cheeks, the bright pain in his eyes and the eager curve of his mouth. And she felt flooded with pity. Yet, even as this pity possessed her, she heard her voice say, slowly, stubbornly: 'I was born with a passion for to-morrow!'

The silence hung like a sword between them. It was broken by rapid footsteps along the hall; then the door was flung open and Ian, a dripping raincoat flung about his shoulders, stood laughing and shaking the rivulets of water from the rim of his bowler. Even in this bleak, unfriendly light he looked absurdly young to be the veteran of a war.

'Hello, old boy,' he greeted Mark. 'Afraid I'm a spot late, but what a downpour! Well, Sara! Going on the job with us?'

'Not this one. Have some tea?'

'Haven't time,' He glanced at his wrist watch. 'We should be on our way.'

Mark stood, slipping on the jacket to his tweed suit and collecting his wallet, keys and note-book from the mantelpiece. As he started to put them in his pockets, he paused and opened the note-book. 'What's the name of that fellow we're going to meet?'

'Colonel B-r-y-n-c-z-k-i, but you pronounce it Brinski. He's the D.A.D.R.S.P.E.F.'

Mark stopped with his pencil in mid-air. 'The *what?*'

'The Deputy Assistant Director Recruiting Services Polish expeditionary Force!'

Mark wrote in his note-book, mumbling to himself, 'Meet Colonel of the D.A.D.R.S.P.E.F. Remember, pronounced "Brinski".'

Sara collected her gloves and furs and purse, and turned to Ian. 'How's Mollie?'

'Oh, splendid. We had toasted cheese sandwiches last night, thanks to you. What a blessing you came to England!'

Mark looked up from putting his note-book back in his pocket and looked gravely at Sara. 'I hope she'll always think so.'

When they reached the street, the rain was coming down in relentless sheets and Mark cast an anxious look at Sara, coatless in her knitted dress.

'Where's your car, Ian?'

'In the next street!'

'Better have this, Sara; we'll have to run for it.'

Mark put his raincoat about Sara's shoulders with a gesture which was a caress, and she looked up at him and smiled. Quite suddenly, everything seemed so easy, so uncomplicated. All the tension dissolved. The words which were left unspoken at Ian's entrance no longer needed to be said.

And, later, seated between the two men in Ian's little sports car, with Mark's raincoat wrapped about her, she felt happiness stir in her once again, like the trembling of a leaf.

'I can't think any more,' she said to herself. 'I—simply—can't. I've no perspective, no sense, no judgment. I'll take Mark's way. One day at a time. Just to-day. It shall be a reprieve from pain; a reprieve from conscience. I'll do my work. I'll be a rational woman. I'll do even better than take a day at a time. I'll take an *hour* at a time. This hour. The next hour. And the hour after that.'

She let herself relax against Mark, her ungloved hand on the rough tweed of his sleeve; and she traced the herring-bone pattern with her finger, and thought how it went on

and on—that closely woven, intricate design, without beginning and without end. And as if in answer to her upspoken wish, Mark's hand closed over hers and they rode in silence through the rain.

As they neared Sara's flat, Mark spoke sharply to Ian: 'This is a one-way street.' But it was too late to come to a stop on the slippery pavement.

'It doesn't matter—I can run across,' Sara said. 'Stop here, Ian, and I'll hop out.'

'Righto,' Ian said, as he continued up South Street, and smiled at Sara as he added, 'You *are* a sport, Sara.' Then he swung the car as near the kerb as he could get, in the thickening traffic.

'Can you make it?' Mark asked, as he opened the door and started to get out. But Sara put out a restraining hand. 'Don't. You're late now.'

With one quick movement, she was out of the car and running towards No. 11, while the rain came down in buckets. Only as she turned to see the car drive away did she realize that she still had Mark's raincoat about her shoulders. He'd be drenched without it! She called out, although she knew it was hopeless, 'Mark! Your raincoat!' But, even as she spoke, the car disappeared at the next turning and was gone. With a frown of annoyance at her forgetfulness, she went into the house.

Mrs. Bunker hadn't kept to her usual schedule the day before; since they were dining out, Sara had told her to take the evening off. Now, as Sara opened the door to her flat, the remains of last night's intended festivities confronted her. But, so fixed was her new mood, even this sight failed to disturb her. She quickly wheeled the tea-trolley with its watery Martini, its untouched terrine of *paté*, into the adjoining pantry. Mrs. Bunker could see to that. Sara's job, for the next hour, was to get out a column, and a good one!

She flung Mark's wet raincoat over the back of a chair, and a letter slipped out of the pocket and skimmed across the floor. But Sara had already turned to her typewriter. She felt strangely exhilarated and happy as she switched on her

work-light, put the paper into the machine and gave herself up to the business of being Sara Scott.

She typed boldly across the top of the page SARA SCOTT SAYS, then started out with quick fingers:

THIS COLUMN STILL COMES TO YOU FROM LONDON WHICH I AM FINDING TOO EXCITING TO LEAVE. OF COURSE, IF THE WORD 'EXCITING', MEANS GLAMOUR AND GAIETY TO YOU, THEN I HAVE USED THE WRONG WORD. BUT, IN MY DICTIONARY, 'TO EXCITE' IS DEFINED AS: 'TO STIR UP: STIMULATE TO ACTIVITY: MOVE TO STRONG EMOTION', AND LONDON, TO-DAY, DOES ALL THESE THINGS.

BUT LEST YOU THINK SARA SCOTT IS BECOMING TOO PRO-BRITISH, EVEN FOR AN ALLY, LET ME QUOTE WHAT OUR OWN RALPH WALDO EMERSON, WHO WAS AS AMERICAN AS BOSTON BAKED BEANS, SAID BACK IN 1833.

'And so, gentlemen, in regard to this aged England, I see her not dispirited, not weak, but well remembering that she has seen dark days before; indeed, with a kind of instinct that she sees a little better in a cloudy day and that in the storm of battle and calamity, she has a secret vigour and a pulse like a cannon. I see her in her old age, not decrepit but young and still daring to believe in her power of endurance and expansion. Seeing this, I say, All hail! mother of nations, mother of heroes, with strength still equal to the time; still wise to entertain and swift to execute the policy which the mind and heart of mankind requires in the present hour.'

Sara leaned back. That's pretty good, she thought. They always like a quote from a good, solid American. It

makes them feel easy in their minds. Even the bemused isolationists couldn't call Emerson a foreigner!

She rubbed her fingers, and realized that the room was cold. No fire. She got up and walked over to the mantelpiece, took a match from a large box, and flicked it alight. The flame leapt up and reflected itself in the mirror. Sara caught a sight of her face in the wavering flame. Then something else caught her eye. Something white and square lying on the floor beside Mark's raincoat. A letter. Still looking in the mirror she stood and stared, as if imprisoned by the surrounding air, until the match burned down to her fingers and she let it fall to the hearth. Her lips were parted and she sucked in her breath in short, quickening gasps. A letter.

She turned from the mirror and looked, as if hoping that the reflection had been a mirage and not a reality. But, there it lay, white and innocent.

Slowly, as if moving against her will, Sara walked over to where the letter lay. She stood beside it and looked down and saw that it was lying flap upwards. But, as clearly as if the writing were burning through the envelope, Sara knew to whom it was addressed. She began to tremble as she stood there, staring at this intruder in her house. Then, slowly, she knelt down and picked up the letter and turned it over in her hands.

Mrs. Mark Trevor,
Woodbine Cottage,
St. Giles,
Cornwall.

Here it was. A fact. Absolute and inescapable. Mrs. Mark Trevor. A woman who would watch for the postman and then run out to the box, reaching in with an eager hand for a letter. A letter from her husband. A letter from Mark.

And what would that letter say? What did *this* letter say? Did Sara hold in her hand an answer to the questions which tormented her?

She dropped the letter on the table and backed away from it with a shudder, as if she had gazed into an abyss: an abyss of degradation, and the knowledge of what her emotion, if unbridled, might lead her to do, was revolting to the point of physical nausea. She pressed her cold hands against the quivering pit of her stomach and still drew the air into her lungs with sucking breaths. Then, when the impulse to retch had subsided, she forced herself to turn away from the table, away from the letter, and to walk back to her typewriter.

She sat down and rested her fingers on the keys. But no words came. And she could still see the letter lying on the table. She tried to turn her typewriter stand, but the light was wrong and her work lay in her own shadow.

Outside, the rain lashed at the windows. The room grew darker. Only the bright, spring flowers and the letter seemed to preserve their serenity, and to shine in the gathering gloom.

She must put the letter out of sight. Slowly, she got up and crossed once more to the table. She picked up the letter and realized how thick it was. A long letter, in Mark's small, distinctive hand. The weight of it was like a stone. She carried it over to the mantelpiece and propped it up against the clock. Now it was where her back would be turned, when she worked. She sat down once more at the typewriter and read over what she had written. But the words made no sense. She leaned back in her chair and her body began to turn, as if pulled by a magnet, until she found herself staring at the letter on the mantelpiece. She could not take her eyes from it. It hypnotized her. And she could feel, once again, its weight in her hand.

Still twisted in her chair so that her body was at a painful, grotesque angle, she spoke to the letter. 'Mrs. Mark Trevor! What is your other name? Mary? Elizabeth? Nancy? And what does Mark call you? How does he write you? Are you his darling, his love, his sweetheart? Or are you just "my dear wife"?'

And when she said, 'my dear wife', the surge of nausea swept over her again and her mouth filled with water, as if the very juices of her body were in rebellion.

Then she heard a key turn in the door and stiffened with expectancy. But it was only Mrs. Bunker, her little pancake of a hat more depressed than ever, as it dripped with rain.

'I'm a bit late, madam. But Bunker, well 'e came 'one unexpected like and 'e 'adn't seen me since Easter, and 'e would 'ave a chat.'

She put her sodden umbrella in the stand as she spoke, and her little hooded eyes darted about the room, coming to rest on the unlighted fire.

'And you've no fire, madam. You must be fair perishing with the cold.'

Without pausing to take off her coat, she scuttled over to the fireplace.

Sara spoke with effort. With a formal politeness which was alien to her and which chilled Mrs. Bunker, who always looked forward to a bit of cheer from her American lady.

'I'm sorry, very sorry, that you've come all this distance in the rain. I shan't need you. Not to-day.'

Mrs. Bunker was already crouched on the hearth and looked up, like a little toad. 'But, madam, there's the tidying up to do.'

'There's nothing very much. It can wait.' Feeling more was expected of her, Sara added, still with that distant courtesy, 'I'm very sorry.'

'Aren't you well, madam?' asked Mrs. Bunker.

Sara continued to look in Mrs. Bunker's direction, but her eyes rested on the letter, above Mrs. Bunker's head.

'Yes, thank you, I'm quite well. But I shan't need you to-day.'

Mrs. Bunker started to scramble to her feet, then looked at Sara's livid face, and put some coal on the fire and lighted it. Whatever had happened to Miss Scott she couldn't say, and Mrs. Bunker had had contact with a wide range of calamities. But whatever it was, Miss Scott would be able to cope with it better if she had a fire. Mrs. Bunker was all for the creature comforts. Debt, death or disaster were more easily faced if the body could be placated. And so, like a shabby little priestess, she kindled a fire.

'And now I'll go and put the kettle on and make some tea.'

'No, thank you, Mrs. Bunker. You're very kind, but—' Mrs. Bunker then did an unheard-of thing. She interrupted while her lady was speaking. Interrupted deliberately and firmly. 'No matter wot ails you, madam, there's nothing like a nice 'ot cuppa tea.'

She went to the kitchen as she spoke, not risking a rebuff.

The fire started to burn brightly and threw wild shadows about the room, dark with rain; and the white envelope, propped up against the clock, was streaked with flickering light.

Mrs. Bunker came back from the kitchen. 'The water'll be boiling in no time.' She hesitated, her tough cockney pride tightened against a snub. Then she remembered all the butter and bacon, all the kindness and friendliness. 'I'll stay and make it for you, madam. You've only to say the word.'

'Yes, thank you. I know.' Sara paused and something in Mrs. Bunker's anxious eyes made her realize that she must go on. Must add that reassuring something. 'I'll make it myself a bit later. I've a piece of work here I must get on with.'

Mrs. Bunker came closer. 'You're sure you're all right, madam?'

'Quite.' And then Sara added, in that forced, polite voice, 'You're very kind.'

Mrs. Bunker stood her ground for a moment, then turned away; and saw the letter on the mantelpiece. Eager to be of help in what she knew to be a crisis, she seized upon it. 'This letter 'ere—should I post it for you?'

Suddenly the deadness went out of Sara's face and her voice came alive. 'Yes! Yes, take it, please!'

Mrs. Bunker, her eyes on Sara, groped for the letter and took it. Sara, seeing it safe from her own avid eyes and hands, gripped the edge of her typewriter table so that her body shook from the vibration. 'Take it and post it! Post it, right away!'

Mrs. Bunker backed away a little, the offending envelope held gingerly in her fingers. 'Yes, madam.'

And then Sara was alone. She, ~~sat~~ listening to the old stairs creak under Mrs. Bunker's feet. She heard the street door open. She heard it close. The letter was gone. On its way to a pillar-box. On its way to Cornwall. On its way to Mark's wife.

Mark's wife! Again that rush of nausea; those churning, twisting muscles of her diaphragm. Before she knew that she had moved, she was out of her chair and out of the room.

Down the stairs. Out of the front door. Up the street, hatless, coatless, in the biting rain. Running. Stumbling. Slipping on the wet pavement. Getting drenched to the skin.

And, just ahead of her, Mrs. Bunker's respectable umbrella held over Mrs. Bunker's pancake of a hat.

'Mrs. Bunker! Mrs. Bunker!'

She ran as she called, but the slosh of rain and the sound of wet tyres on wet streets drowned out her voice.

Sara lost her footing and fell, skinning her knees and tearing her sheer stockings to shreds. A concerned passer-by helped her to her feet, but she shook off his solicitous hands and continued to run.

Her hair dripped against her face like seaweed. And still she ran, with Mrs. Bunker's umbrella bobbing ahead of her, just out of sound, just out of reach.

'Mrs. Bunker! Mrs. Bunker!'

And then a traffic light stopped the pedestrian flow and Sara caught up with her.

'That letter! That letter, Mrs. Bunker!'

Out from under the ancient umbrella, Mrs. Bunker's puckered face appeared as from a cave. She stared in frightened surprise at Sara's distraught face, her wet and dishevelled appearance.

'But, madam—but, madam——' was all she could bring herself to say.

Then Sara saw that the letter was not in Mrs. Bunker's hand. Her eyes dilated in terror and the words were torn from her in jerks.

'Where is it? You haven't posted it? It hasn't gone!'

Mrs. Bunker fumbled with the clasp of her purse. 'No,

madam. I put it in me purse 'ere until I should pass a pillar-box. So's it wouldn't get wet.'

She carefully fished it out as she spoke, and Sara stood by, asking. 'I—just remembered—something—I have—to add—something—important. Very.'

Sara took the letter, and held it protectingly against her body to shield it from the rain, and without another word to Mrs. Bunker she turned and ran back the way she had come.

Mrs. Bunker looked after her with old, troubled eyes. She even took a few steps after Sara. Then, with the wisdom of the unwanted, she went about her business.

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Steam poured from the kettle spout and the flap of the envelope began to loosen and lift up.

Sweat poured down Sara's face. Water dripped from her hair. Her knitted dress clung to her shuddering body. She was engulfed by a wave of shame and guilt. And still she held the envelope over the steaming kettle until the last bit of glue was dissolved and she could open the letter.

Out of the humid, steam-filled kitchen and back in the living-room, Sara took out the thick pages of Mark's letter with palsied hands, and spread them open. And the first words sprang at her like an animal from the jungle.

'My darling Kay.'

She became physically unable to read another line. Her eyes refused to travel down the closely written page. They receded in their sockets, focusing only on those opening words, 'my darling Kay.'

Then they ceased to be written words and became spoken ones. Mark's voice, which had never ceased to move her, never failed to stir her to happiness and delight—Mark's voice, with its caressing Cornish burr, saying, 'My darling Kay.'

Saying these words over and over, until his voice echoed and reverberated from the walls. Until the words flew like arrows through the air.

Sara dropped the letter and it sprawled on the table, while she stumbled to a chair and crouched in it, her hands held over her ears to shut out the sound of Mark's voice. And still she heard it.

'My darling Kay . . . my darling Kay . . . my darling Ka'

* * *

Although it was barely four in the afternoon, the sky was dark and the clouds black-bellied with rain, when a car slid into the kerb outside Sara's flat. The chauffeur reached out and opened the door and Carter Reynolds got out. He paused for a moment, looking up at the windows. Then a voice, Jake's voice, spoke from inside the car.

'Shall I come up with you?'

'No. Better wait here.'

Reynolds spoke without turning; spoke, still looking up at the dark windows. Then he walked slowly forward and rang the bell of No. 11. He waited, but there was no reply. He rang again. Then touched the door and found it loosely latched, yielding to his touch. And went inside.

The unfamiliar stairs, which Reynolds had been loath to tread, were unlighted, and he walked slowly to the top. There he saw a faint film of light showing under the door. He knocked. Firm, measured strokes, like the tolling of a bell. And waited.

Sara sat still huddled in the chair, holding herself locked in her arms in a sheltering embrace. The sound of a hand on the door struck slowly through her consciousness. One, two, three. Then, again: one, two, three.

Not Mrs. Bunker. Not Mark. They both had a key. Then her head lifted, like a hound scenting the fox. Perhaps Mark had forgotten his key. Had lost it.

Her body became unentwined and she emerged from the chair as from a womb, limb by limb, and moved towards the door.

Reynolds raised his hand to knock once again, when the door opened and Sara stood in the dim light. Her hair still

clung damply to her head and face. Her knitted dress was twisted and misshapen. Her legs showed through her torn stockings, scratched and streaked with dried blood.

'Oh, I thought—I thought——' and then her voice trailed away.

Reynolds took one stocky look, then moved past her into the room and drew her away from the door and closed it gently.

Sara turned her glazed eyes to his and then, with an uncoordinated gesture towards Mark's letter lying open on the table, started to speak with a sudden spurt of energy, like the spasmodic jetting of a fountain.

'Carter! Look. See what I've done! I opened Mark's letter to his wife. Isn't that shameful? That I could so degrade myself! That love could bring me to an act like that!' She reached out and took him by the arm, clutching him with spastic fingers. 'Carter, do you understand? I opened a letter to his wife. But I had to know! I *had* to know!'

Reynolds, in all the years he had known Sara, had never seen her like this.

'I opened it very carefully. I can close it up again. I didn't read it, Carter. Not any of it. Only the opening. Only the very first words.' Her voice thickened and broke. 'Oh, Carter—he calls her "my darling Kay"!''

Reynolds had no words to give Sara. Not yet. He waited gravely until she caught her breath and her voice went stumbling on.

'Promise me you'll never tell Mark! Promise me he'll never know!'

'He'll never know.'

Sara looked at his quiet face, his eyes filled with compassion. 'I ought to tell you—I must tell you, I couldn't give him up. In spite of all you said, I couldn't give him up. No matter what his life was before we met, I am bound for ever into his very being. He can never forget me. He can never leave me!'

Reynolds turned to Sara and took her hands. Took them

and held them, as if trying to pour some of his strength into her. 'He has left you, Sara. That's why I am here.'

'Mark sent you? Mark sent you to say that he had left me?'

'No. Mark didn't send me. He couldn't. Mark is dead. He started on a reconnaissance flight but the plane was scarcely off the ground when they ran into trouble. Then something exploded and the plane fell into the Channel. Everyone was lost.' He gave a deep, shuddering sigh as if he himself had dealt the blow.

CHAPTER X

SARA shrank from the memory of that blow. She could feel it still; could feel it beating against her as the sea below beat against the rocks. Each shattering assault of the waves found its vibration within her. Thud followed thud, like a fist pounding on her heart. And all the strength she had fought for in the time since Mark's death ran out like sand from a glass, leaving her hollow and empty.

Her eyes sought the rocks standing out in the Cornish sea, so motionless and so strong; and the blind, beseeching prayer came once again to her lips. Not a prayer to recover, to forget or to cease from pain and grieving. A prayer just to endure. To take one hour after another; one step after another; one breath after another. As long as she lived.

She moved her suddenly rigid hand which had rested on the stone wall and saw that the imprint of the lichen was crimped against her palm. And she wondered, did everything leave its scar on the vulnerable flesh, the vulnerable heart? But even as she stared at her palm, the tiny marks became less red; and she envied her hand because it would soon be free of this fleshly memory; would once more be smooth and unscarred, as her heart would never be.

It was mid-afternoon by now and the August sun was constant in its heat. It burned through Sara's thin suit to her strangely thin shoulder-blades, yet failed to warm her. And she remembered how impervious to cold she had been

all that winter and spring; how her blood had raced and her body had glowed. The weather had been merely something which happened in the streets.

Out beyond the surf-beaten rocks the sea was calm and deep and blue. The ship which would bear her home would pass through that blue water and by this rocky shore. Tomorrow she would sail from Plymouth, a pilgrim in reverse, leaving that which she had sought and found, and setting her face towards the unwelcome and the undesired.

And if her ship had not been sailing from Plymouth she would not be sitting here. She remembered how Mrs. Bunker, when she returned to the flat in South Street after Sara's long weeks of illness in the nursing home, had looked at the tags as she tied them to the luggage.

'Plymouth, madam. That's down Devon way. My gran'dad was a Devon man.' And she had paused in her labours as if the memory that her grandfather had been a countryman had brought before her a vision of space and sky and green fields. 'Lovely country it was, 'e told us. Warm. 'E used to say the air was soft and sweet as milk. Palm trees growing, too. Fancy! Palm trees in England!' Her twangy little voice slowed down as the memories floated to the surface of her mind. 'Used to 'op rides on the Torpoint ferry, 'e did, when 'e was a nipper, and visit with the foreigners.'

'Foreigners?' Sara had echoed.

'Cornish folk, madam.'

'Is Devon so close, then?'

'The next county, madam. My gran'dad, 'e used to tell about the smugglers' caves and the fishermen and the miners. They still had tin mines in Cornwall, when 'e was a lad. A great one for talking, 'e was, when it was about the country. Never could abide the town, 'e couldn't.'

Sara thought she had wrung her sorrow dry, but when she heard Mrs. Bunker's cockney voice telling her that Cornwall was the next county from where she would sail, all the old pain and longing had returned, like a spring bursting through stony ground. And a plan had been born.

Once she had dispatched Mrs. Bunker on her errand, Sara had haunted the window waiting for her return. 'Take a taxi both ways,' she had impressed upon her. But after nearly two hours she had not yet returned and Sara had turned away to look once more at the clock, when the sound of a taxi drew her back to the window. It had stopped in front of No. 11. But it had not been Mrs. Bunker. It had been Jake.

Sara had forgotten her impatience for Mrs. Bunker's return in her delight at seeing Jake's rumpled body lumber out of the cab and his dear, ugly face peering up at the number over the door. She had run to meet him at the top of the stairs; to throw her arms about him; to say, over and over again, 'Bless you—bless you—bless you!'

And Jake had blushed and beamed and looked at her so kindly and so wisely that she had very nearly burst into tears, as she had done that first day, so long ago.

'Jake! I simply can't believe my eyes—having you walk in like this! I thought you were in Germany?'

'I was. Left this morning. Next stop, Japan.'

'Japan?'

'The Boss seems to think the end's getting pretty near, out there.'

'And what do you think?'

'Oh, me? I ride with the Boss. His hunches are pretty good.'

Jake had walked into the flat as he spoke and taken in the trunks, locked and tagged, the hand luggage neatly stacked together with Sara's typewriter, her top coat and beret ready to put on.

'All packed and ready to go.'

Sara had nodded and looked around the room, stripped to its bones.

'I wish I could offer you a drink, Jake, but I've practically moved out.'

'That's okay. I came to see you. It's been a long time.'

'I can give you a cigarette, though. American. And there's some coffee left——' Sara had started for the kitchen as she spoke, but Jake had reached out his warm hand and stopped her.

'Relax. Relax. That's what the doctor ordered.'

'These English doctors! I wish you could see the list of the things I'm supposed to do—and supposed not to do. No wonder everyone over here lives to be ninety!'

Sara had given Jake a cigarette and flipped a match alight with her thumb-nail, then paused as her eyes met Jake's and the little flame had hang between them for a moment like an unspoken word.

'Pneumonia isn't funny,' Jake had said after Sara had handed him the match.

'It was only 'flu.'

'Flu, plus. Anyway, you and the world are in the same state at the same time. All you've both got to do is get back to normal.'

'That can be quite a job.'

'You seem to have done it,' Jake had replied and his smile was like a pat on the head. And Sara had smiled back and thought, how good Jake was! And there had been a comfortable silence between them. Then Sara had had that odd sense of something unsaid; something which Jake had come to say.

'What is it, Jake? What do you want to ask me?'

'I don't want to ask you anything, Sara. But the Boss would kind of like to know when you're coming back to work.'

'You can tell the Boss that I'm coming back to work next month.'

And Jake had looked at her steadily and then, his voice no less kind, had said, 'Why don't you tell him, Sara? As they say in the ads, he's only as far as your telephone.'

And Sara had turned and looked at the impersonal little black instrument and, with no comment, had picked it up and put in the call. And while they had waited, Jake had seen Sara's ticket lying on the table and picked it up.

'I don't see why you're not flying back,' he had said.

'I need those days on the boat. I need to put distance, the sense of distance, between me and England.'

'Good girl.' Then he had looked closer and seen the date

on the ticket. 'But you don't sail until Wednesday. And this is only Monday!'

And then Sara had remembered Mrs. Bunker and the errand she had sent her on. Jake must be got rid of before Mrs. Bunker's return! All her old discipline had come back and she had made her voice level as she replied, 'I thought I'd avoid the crowd of the boat-trait. Sleep at Plymouth and go aboard early on sailing day.' And then, before Jake could say anything, she had pushed the telephone away from her. 'I think I won't phone, after all.' But even as she had said the words, the phone had rung. And Sara had found herself answering it in a voice which she hated: too bright, too high, and saying all the wrong things.

'Hello . . . Oh, hello, Carter, it's Sara. . . .'

And Reynolds's voice had come through, thin and metallic but so personal that she could almost feel his heart beat through the words: 'Sara, my dear! How nice, how very nice to hear your voice!'

'Now don't try to act too surprised. Jake here probably guaranteed he'd have me on the phone five minutes after his charming, if elephantine arrival!'

Sara had laughed and had felt the surge of relief that swept through Reynolds across all the miles which separated them. 'Jake thinks you would like to have me tell you that I'm coming back to work next month.'

'We've missed you,' was all Reynolds had trusted himself to say.

'We?'

'The paper and I.'

'How's your circulation?'

'Splendid. How's yours?'

'Don't be an idiot! I mean the paper.'

'I know you do. But I'm so happy hearing your voice that I feel like saying foolish things. Sure you feel up to it—coming back to the job?'

'I need to come back. And I need the job. A lot.'

'Flying back?' he had asked, fighting to keep the urgency out of his voice.

'Sailing. Taking the *Doric* on Wednesday. She's nice, slow boat and we'll flop about the ocean together so we'll arrive all rested and relaxed.'

'That's a fine idea. I'll be on hand to meet you.'

'Okay, Boss.'

'And, Sara——'

'Yes?'

'I had a tough time filling that space your column left in the paper. But it was much tougher trying to fill——' His voice had grown rough as he had paused, then added, 'Well, in fact, I couldn't.'

'Did you try very hard?'

'Not very.'

Then, as if the words had been forced out of him, Reynolds had asked, 'Sure you're all right, Sara? You don't know how I've worried.'

'I'm very, very well. A little thin but Jake says I look back to normal.'

A sigh of gratitude rasped through the wire. 'Jake's a good boy. Always tells the truth. I'll say good-bye, then. And I'll be counting the days.'

And Sara had been unable to keep the pain out of her voice as she had replied, 'Don't! It's a bad habit.' And, sensing the echoing pain, she had added swiftly, warmly, 'And, Carter, you've been sweet to give me all this time. To let me sweat it out alone. I'll always be grateful.'

Then she had hung up the phone, dampness on her brow and beading her upper lip. And as if on a signal, Mrs. Bunker had burst into the room, an envelope held triumphantly in her hand.

'Well, madam, I thought I'd seen the pink limit in queuing up for potatoes and bread and a nasty bit of fish without even a pyper about 'is middle! But that railroad stytion and the booking office—well, madam, if that's wot a person 'as to go through to travel, I'll stye 'ome. When I finally got through to the wicket and said "Cornish Riviera Express," by the fuss 'e myde, you'd have thought I was tryin' to go to H'Africa! And 'e says, madam, get down early or you'll have to stand all the way.'

Mrs. Bunker had handed the ticket over and Sara had been able to do nothing but take it and say, in a small voice, 'Thank you, Mrs. Bunker,' and wait for the kitchen door to close behind her. Then she had turned and faced Jake, who looked at her gravely, all the kindness washed out of his face.

'Cornwall. St. Giles, I suppose?' he had asked.

'I have to go, Jake. I must! ~~I must~~. I can't leave England for ever without just one look at the town where he lived, the house where he lived! That's all I mean to do. Walk along the street, his street, and see the house, so that I can carry something away.'

'Seems to me you're carrying plenty away, as it is.'

'Look. I'm going back to America for the rest of my days. I'll never set foot in England again. And the kind of life Mark lived here, before I knew him, the kind of house he went to sleep in and woke up in—it's all just a blank.'

'Keep it that way,' Jake had said, grimly.

'I can't. I've got to fill in the picture; see it whole; then put it away for keeps.' And when Jake hadn't answered, only looked at her, his face heavy with sadness and regret, she had said desperately, 'What's the harm? I'll stay there one night, then go back to Plymouth and sail for home. Finished.'

'Finished. That's an easy word to say.'

'It will be. I didn't really intend to go. It all just happened when I found out how close Plymouth is to St. Giles. Don't you see, Jake, I couldn't bear to be so close—and not go. But don't tell Carter. I mean, he wouldn't understand.'

'Neither do I. But I won't tell him.'

'Bless you. And I know this is right for me to do, if I'm ever to have peace of mind again.'

And Jake had sat there, shaking his tousled head, and muttering, 'Just turning the knife around and around—'

'Maybe I must—before I can get it out!'

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But now, seated on the crumbling stone wall with the pungent smell of the sea encircling her, Sara knew that Jake had been right. She had no business here. She was an alien.

An intruder. And she found herself on her feet, hardly knowing how she had got there, and starting up the hill. There *must* be another way down! She couldn't pass that house of grief, those windows of bereavement. Not again. With her imaginative writer's mind, she could picture the sorrowing woman hiding within that vine-clad cottage. Woodbine Cottage. Flowers and growth and sweetness without; and within, darkness and silence and loss.

The very nearness to Mark's house which she had so desired, now filled her with revulsion and dread and she raced on up the road to where it curved around the hill. But there it stopped abruptly. Sara had found her way into a dead end—into thorns and stones and bracken. She stood staring up the hill. If she could only struggle to the top of that rough ground, a path would surely open! But after hour-like minutes of effort she stumbled and faltered until she was on her hands and knees, choked with the summer dust and the aromatic scent of the bruised wild herbs. Her shoes were filled with little sharp stones and her nails were encrusted with dirt; and she thought, they look as if I'd been digging a grave! She gave it up, hot and a little sick from the effort and stood, her heart pounding in painful unison with the sound of the sea against the rocks below; then turned back, slowly, towards the way she had come.

She found herself picking her way down the hill, sensing danger in every step, like some woodland animal lifting its head to catch the scent of guns and quivering with the race memory of blood and wounds. But with the sense of danger came its bosom companion—desire.

She remembered as a child being drawn again and again, as if by a cord knotted to the fearsome pit of her stomach, to the roller coaster of a fair, her little sandalled feet weighted with dread. Dread and delight. Danger and desire.

And as her feet carried her down the hill, down towards Mark's house, a voice within her cried out, 'Go back, go back, before it is too late! No matter how rough and thorny the way, it will be smooth compared to this!' She turned and looked once more towards the stony hill, thick with thorns.

can't go back. Not that way. I shall be lost.' And the voice whispered, 'You are lost, already!'

But as she forced her body down the road, a sudden lightness possessed her and she moved like a ship driven by the wind, with a sense of purpose and destination, fixed beyond all changing.

With the deserted crest of the hill behind her, the sounds of summer holidays began to drift up from the beach: the voices of children, grown shrill with too much play, and the screams of the seagulls as they swooped and scavenged for food.

Then, as if they had risen from the earth, Sara came upon an excited cluster of perspiring little boys who fairly blocked her way. She stood listening to their oddly mature little British voices; even after all her months in England the clear precision of their speech always struck her. A rangy young man was in charge of them and they swarmed about his tweed-clad legs like eager puppies, prefacing every phrase with, 'I say, sir——' until he raised his freckled hand in amiable protest.

'Now then, if we're to have any sports this afternoon, let's get ourselves organized.' He paused and looked around the group of shock-headed little boys who stood in the road with their backs to Sara; brown hair and blond and ginger, with a black thatch or two thrown in.

'Polworth, Trelawney and Quinn, you get the stumps from the school locker—and don't forget the bails.' As they sped off into a short cul-de-sac, the young man surveyed the others.

'Rashmore, Penryn major and Penryn minor, get a couple of old cricket balls and bring the pads. Now, the rest of you chaps, go down and see if the Vicar will umpire for us. Let young Trevor speak for you; he knows how to get on with the Vicar.'

Young Trevor! Sara strained her eyes trying to find Mark's son in the tangle of pushing little boys as they sped down the hill. Everything in her longed to identify him; to see Mark's face renewed in him. She wanted to stop the young man and ask, 'Please, please! Which one is young Trevor?' But even had she dared, the words would have

locked in her throat. And as the desire was born and rejected, the young man turned away and was gone.

Sara stood, shaken by this fresh assault on her emotions. She had nearly forgotten the existence of the child in her awareness of the woman. And here, only seconds ago, within reach of her hand, had stood a grubby, shouting little boy—Mark's son. And she had not seen him. Had not known which one he was. She could have wept there in the dusty road; wept with rage and frustration and a fresh sense of loss.

And as she faced the hill which still rolled before her, she closed her eyes and wished, as she had never wished before, that she might open them and find that the village of St. Giles had vanished. That she was back in Plymouth with its waiting ship and its waiting ocean. That she might escape for ever having to pass that house again. And yet, as she forced herself on, her leaden footsteps again grew light; and though she kept her eyes averted, kept them on the sea and the sky and the gulls, she felt the increasing nearness of the house as if it were sending out little quivering tentacles to bind and hold her.

Her steps slackened and slowly stopped and she turned her head, inch by inch, dreading to see what she knew in her bones was waiting for her; just as she had known the name which would be written on that envelope as it had lain, flap upwards, on the floor. And all the memory of that day surged back; how she had placed the letter where she couldn't see it and how her body had been pulled towards it as if by a magnet, as it was being pulled now, to read 'Woodbine Cottage' on the gate. She could feel again the weight of that letter in her hand. And its opening words pierced her memory and whispered and eddied about her like a ring of icy air: 'My darling Kay—my darling Kay—my darling Kay!' And she stood there shivering, her eyes fixed on the letter-box beside the gate in which all those letters had lain, and wondered how often the woman, sitting now in that empty house, had watched for the postman and then flung open the door and run down the path with hurrying feet.

And as if her physical presence had been evoked by Sara's

imaginings, the door of the house opened and a woman came out and walked quickly down the path towards the gate. Towards the letter-box.

Sara wanted to cry out, 'But there can be no letters now!' But she could only stand silent, rooted to the ground, and watch the woman's quick, light steps and wait for her to open the gate and reach an eager hand into the letter-box.

But when the latch of the gate clicked open, the woman passed by the letter-box and walked directly to Sara, her lips already parted to speak. And her voice was light and soft as she said, 'I was hoping you'd come back.'

And before Sara could do more than tighten the muscles of her stomach against the lurch of fear, she went on: 'I saw you when you passed the house, going up the hill, and I thought you were going to stop. Then, when I saw you coming down, I was certain you were.' She paused and smiled. 'You've come about the room.'

'The room——' Sara echoed in a voice hollow with shock and incomprehension. She focused her eyes with difficulty and saw before her a young woman who looked scarcely more than a girl, with a strong, young body which strained against her faded cotton dress. Very blue eyes looked at Sara from under a tranquil brow and her thick brown hair was worn in a long bob which swung as she turned her head and gestured towards the house.

'I haven't a card in the window yet. I only put up the notice in the Post Office this morning.'

How healthy she looked, Sara thought with a pang of wonder. How unwounded and unscarred. An aura of well-being hung about her as clean as the soap and water cleanness of her dress. And Sara recalled how she had shrunk from even passing this house again for it had seemed a violation of privacy, an intrusion on grief. But there was no grief in this face! The woman stood there, smiling in the sunlight, her eyes as unclouded as the hot, blue August sky. Where were the reddened and tear-heavy eyelids? The twisted hands? The ravaged mouth? And Sara shook with sudden anger.

'Aren't you feeling well?' the woman asked.

'It's so warm. And I've been ill.'

'Then do come in and rest for a moment. It's quite cool in the house.'

The woman turned towards the still open gate as she spoke and Sara, released from her sense of guilt and trespass, followed her up the path between the rows of scented flowers, bending with the heat.

CHAPTER XI

THE house was with a salty coolness as if the sea air had swirled through its rooms for countless years and scoured them with a briny hand.

Sara sat quite still, her head resting against the cushioned chair and her eyes closed, until she knew by the little gust of air, that a door had opened and closed behind Kay. She had not dared look about until she was alone, and had entered the room as a blind man walks, sensing the nearest chair by its density rather than by sight.

Now she lifted her trembling eyelids and her eyes darted about like a serpent's tongue, sending little forked glances to flick over the room. Bleached white walls which bulged with age; flowered chintz gently blurred by time and soap; a small upright piano with an open book of music on its carved rack; a stone fireplace and beside it a man's leather chair with a gleaming hollow where a head had rested; and, within easy reach, a magazine stand crammed with periodicals and newspapers. A bowl of garden flowers stood on a fine old desk of honeyed wood. In the tiny vestibule the door to a hall cupboard stood ajar and disclosed tennis racquets, a cricket bat and some fishing rods. At one end of the living-room a steeply curved stairway led upstairs and, under it, an arched alcove made a small dining-room. At the other end, silk-curtained glass doors led to another room.

I am like a thief, thought Sara, making careful note of everything in a room, planning to return and plunder it.

And then a sudden thought assailed her: perhaps this woman, this happy, healthy woman, was not Mark's wife. What proof had she? Only that she was living in his house. But even as the thought prickled in her mind, sending out tiny currents of hope, she turned her head and looked into Mark's eyes.

The photograph rested, not on the mantelpiece or, the piano or the desk, nor any obvious place; but in a corner of the room where the sunlight filtered through the trailing woodbine, it stood on a table beside a sewing-basket which overflowed with a small boy's socks. And from this place Mark's eyes gazed at her so gravely, so compassionately, she nearly wept.

Then the door from the kitchen swung open and Kay came towards her, the glass of water in her hand, as clear and cool as her own untroubled eyes. Mark's photograph was in her line of vision and although there was not a flicker of change in her expression, Sara felt a sense of communication between them and knew, without a doubt, that she was Mark's wife. His darling Kay.

Sara held out an unsteady hand to take the glass of water and became conscious of her dirt-encrusted nails, her grimy palms.

'I was trying to find another way back,' she heard herself say.

'There is no other way.'

'Yes. I realize that. Only one way back.' Sara looked at Kay over the edge of the glass. 'Only this way.'

She drank the cool water, her throat contracting with every swallow as she felt Mark's eyes upon her.

'Wouldn't you like to wash your hands?' Kay asked. And Sara nodded and put down the glass and followed Kay quickly as she moved towards the silk-curtained glass doors, away from Mark's presence.

But as Sara entered this adjoining room, it suddenly receded from her and she felt herself being rushed backward through time; back to the long, dark winter evenings she and Mark had spent together in South Street. For the room was permeated with his presence and Sara stood, motionless,

scarcely daring to breathe for fear that, with the first air expelled from her lungs, would come his name.

This was Mark's study, lined with his books, filled with his pipes, and the walls hung with water-colours of his cherished Cornish coast. The carpet was worn where his feet had trod as he had read and thought and paused to write. The chair stood at an angle to his desk, as if he had but just arisen. A couch, a divan, as they called them in England, was placed to one side where he must have rested after a day's work. Or slept, if the night hours grew long.

Sara stood, trembling. It was as if the room had put its arms about her, enveloping her in love and loss and memory.

Kay, who had walked in ahead of her, now stood in the open door leading to a small bathroom.

'The arrangements are rather primitive; we added this later. But there is hot and cold water.'

'Cold,' said Sara, and moved into the little bathroom and held her wrists under the flow of cold water and felt the leaping of her pulse subside; while over and over again, she whispered to herself. *Oh, God, don't punish me too much! I didn't mean it to happen like this.*

Then, her hands cleaned and white as wax, she turned off the water and heard Kay's voice rippling through the sudden silence. Sara walked out in time to hear her say:

'... if you did take the room, I'm afraid you'd have to sleep on the divan. You see, it used to be a study.'

Sara stared at her. *This* was the room she intended to rent! Mark's room! Some stranger off the street would *live* here; sit in his chair, write at his desk, read his books; share that intimacy of the mind of which she had grown so jealous!

Kay's voice became a little anxious as she went on: 'Are you sure you won't mind all the books? I've been meaning to pack them away—the room has never been let before—'

Her voice trailed off and then grew brisk again as she became conscious of a pipe-rack crammed with pipes, across the room.

'Oh, I must take these away!' And moved towards them.

'No, don't!' Kay stopped abruptly and turned an inquiring

face towards her. 'I'm sorry,' Sara added. 'I mean—they give a homey look. All the men I know smoke pipes.'

Kay smiled. A warm and appealing smile. 'Then you do like the room?'

'Yes. It's really very nice. But——'

'But it won't do?'

'It isn't that. I'm afraid I can't help under false pretences. You see, I'm only stopping the night in St. Giles.'

Kay's face fell and Sara thought, 'Why, she *needs* to rent this room! A matter of four or five pounds a week!' And she made her voice gentle as she explained:

'The Cornwall Arms was full. I couldn't get a bed, even for one night.'

'I—I had hoped to let the room for a long stay. But if you'd like to stop here the one night, you may.'

But before Sara could reply, before she could round her lips to form a 'no', there was a clatter of feet outside and a child's clear, excited voice calling, 'Mum! I say, Mum!'

Kay turned to Sara with a smile, her face full of love. 'I forgot to tell you—I have a small boy who is rather noisy. Or need I add that?'

And even as she spoke, the front door was flung open and a fair-haired little boy catapulted himself into the room.

Sara had steeled herself to see another reminder of Mark, but the boy was astonishingly like Kay. Thick blond hair which would turn brown; an open, candid brow over blue eyes; a sturdy body. He was like Mark only in his eager energy and his impetuous speech and in the finely boned hands which he flung out as he spoke.

'I say, Mum—may I give my piano practice a miss? We've got a simply smashing cricket match on! The Vicar is umpiring and the other chaps are rather depending on me. I'm the fastest bowler and the strongest bat on our side.'

As he broke off for breath, he became aware of Sara. 'Sorry, Mum. I didn't know anyone was here.'

'This is my son, Brian.' She laid a hand on his jersey-clad shoulder as she spoke, as if the mere touch of him was pleasure. 'Brian, this is Miss . . .' Kay turned blankly to Sara.

Sara sucked in a deep breath and said, 'Miss Scott. Sara Scott.' And realized that the name meant nothing to Kay.

'Miss Scott. She is going to stop the night with us.'

At these words of Kay's, everything sane and intelligent in Sara's nature cried out—now is the time to speak—now is the time to leave—now is the time to run. But the old hunger for Mark's past dug its fangs into her. To spend one night in his room. One night to hold and treasure. To touch his books; to rest her eyes where his had lain; to lay her head where his had rested. Kay had made her decision for her. And those twin companions, dread and delight—danger and desire—took her by the hand and held her fast.

'How do you do, Miss Scott,' Brian had said dutifully; then, in the same breath, had turned back to his mother. 'Mum, may I go? A couple of the chaps are waiting outside. We raced all the way from the Vicarage and I beat young Johnson and Twinkle Barrett. Please, Mum?'

'Your music lesson is Friday. What will Miss Tomkins say?'

'I'll practise *double* to-morrow. Really, Mum.'

'No, darling. I really don't think I could bear hearing double practice.' She turned to Sara.

'Where is your luggage?'

'I only brought an overnight case. I left it at the inn.'

'Will you pick up Miss Scott's bag after the match, Brian? I'll telephone and tell them to have it ready for you.'

'Rather! I say, Mum—you *are* a sport!'

With a quick hug for his mother and a bob of the head to Sara, he was gone. Kay looked after him with a rueful smile.

'Oh, dear, I do hope I'm not spoiling him—but it's not easy to bring up a boy alone. You see, his father is dead.'

His father is dead. Mark is dead. Only four months and she could say it with such simplicity, without a tremor of the voice or a shadow on that tranquil brow. Sara forced the conventional words through her own cold lips.

'I—I'm sorry——'

'It was a futile sort of death. An accident on a routine job, after going through the greatest dangers. And there was so much he wanted to do.'

And then, in her clear, soft voice, she went on speaking about Sara and her living arrangements.

‘I can manage supper to-night and breakfast in the morning; but I’m afraid it won’t be quite what you’re accustomed to in America. You *are* an American, aren’t you? Or Canadian?’

‘American. And I can manage very well on whatever you have.’

Kay looked at her with a sudden smile. ‘You know, I rather dreaded taking a stranger into my house—I’m pleased the first one turned out to be you.’ She held out her hand. ‘My name is Trevor. Kay Trevor.’

And as Sara took Kay’s outstretched hand she felt such strength and warmth pour through her that she longed to lay her head on that strong young bosom under the faded dress, and cry out, *Oh, comfort me—you who need no comforting!*

Shut in by the glass doors, Sara sat quietly. She had hours ahead. Uninterrupted hours. Her eyes fell on the books, but she dared not touch them now. Not with Kay’s light steps moving about the house, and the hazard of the unlocked door. Nor did she actually want to touch them, to read them. Not yet. There was time. At night when the house was still. Where she had been avid and greedy before, she was content now to sit in the quiet of the shabby room and let its peace soak into her. She wanted to make everything last. To fill all the hours before she left in the morning. To store away every moment like honey in a hive. And the luxury of taking it all in slowly, of savouring one thing at a time, was as satisfying as food.

She took in the view from the window where a dip in the hill disclosed the sea, darker blue now, with its restless surge subdued under the lowering sun.

A globe of the world was on a nearby stand within reach of her hand; Sara touched it with her finger and, as it turned, showing its oceans and continents, Sara thought how once an ocean had separated her from Mark. And now she sat here in his room.

On the desk near the window stood a plaster reproduction of the Winged Victory with its proud, headless body and its magnificent wings. Sara remembered that it had been the figure-head on a ship and now, with the salty air that drifted in through the open window, she had a sense of rushing wind and spray as if that beautiful, thrusting body with its clinging draperies blown back, was once again facing the billowing, uncharted seas. Here in this house, the sea was in everything.

The evening breeze blew up and the globe still revolved gently from Sara's touch, as the world turns on its axis. A world swinging round and round. Land and sea locked together in an eternal embrace and bound on their endless journey through time and space. Sara let her mind travel with the globe; relived all the miles she had had to cover before arriving at this strange destination. Or had it been not an end but a fresh point of departure? She felt suspended between the past and the future and only Kay's knock on the door brought her back to the present.

'Dinner in ten minutes, Miss Scott, if you'll be ready,' said Kay through the closed door.

'Oh, yes—thank you.'

'And your overnight case is here. May I bring it in?'

'If you will.'

The door opened and Kay came in with Sara's bag which she put on a low chest of drawers. She had changed from the faded cotton dress to a silk print, also blue. Sara thought to herself, someone had told her she should always wear blue; then reproached herself for the thought. She herself almost always wore beige, which enhanced the pale olive of her skin. But she felt it was an unobvious colour; not like blue for a blue-eyed woman. Perhaps it had been Mark who had liked her in blue. 'I saw you in blue the first time, darling.' She was his darling Kay.

Kay's dress had little clean white daisies sprinkled over the pale blue ground, with bright yellow centres. It suited her. There was a garden flower feeling about her. Something fresh and simple and sturdy; something which could be cut down as daisies are cut down in a lawn—and bloom again

the next spring. She would have to be uprooted to be destroyed.

Kay turned away from the chest of drawers and went back into the living-room, appearing in a moment with a glass and a small tray beside a decanter.

'I thought you might like a glass of sherry. I hope you don't mind. You—you looked so pale.'

'Did I?' Sara said. 'I'm afraid it's a bad habit. I'm always pale. But I'd love the sherry.'

She smiled as she said it, and Kay smiled in return. Then Sara saw there was only one glass.

'Aren't you having some with me?'

'Why, yes. I wasn't going to, but I think I shall. I'll get another glass.' Kay paused in the doorway. 'It's been rather a long while since I had a drink with anyone before dinner.'

And Sara thought, I'm having Mark's drink with her. To stifle that thought, she crossed to a mirror and smoothed her always smooth hair and straightened the jacket of her silk suit. Then Kay reappeared with the extra glass and picked up the tray.

'I think we'll have it out here,' she said, and started back into the living-room. Sara followed her and thought—isn't it odd? I've always been the dynamic, the driving Sara Scott. And yet this quiet girl makes decisions for me, and I let her. And this sense of direction, of guidance, stayed with Sara as they drank their sherry, and carried over into the dinner hour where she ate obediently what was set before her.

'It's nothing very grand,' said Kay. 'Only cheese macaroni—with a green salad out of our garden. And some cooked fruit.'

'Raisin scones, I hope,' came from Brian, now clad in a striped jersey and flannel shorts, his blond hair still damp from his bath.

'Yes, raisin scones—and milk for you, my lad.'

'I say, Mum, do I have to drink milk? I'm——'

'You're the fastest bowler and the strongest bat, so you need extra nourishment to keep up all that strength.'

Kay poured the milk as she spoke and once again Sara got that sense of hidden stamina and resolve.

The table was attractively laid with good old china on a sunny yellow cloth. There was a small bowl of flowers, strawberry jam in a Waterford glass dish and silver with a thin, worn crest on it. The food was pleasantly prepared with a taste of simple goodness. And there was no sense of effort, no sense of anything unusual. Sara felt certain that Kay prepared appetizing meals three times a day, served on a fresh cloth and with flowers on the table.

As Sara sat there with the shafts of sunlight turning the strawberry jam into glistening ruby, she wondered if she was sitting in Mark's chair and she pressed the palms of her hands against the edge of the table, bracing herself against this thought. *I mustn't think. I mustn't visualize. I'm just a woman sitting at a table with another woman. A woman who is a stranger. And a child. After to-morrow we shall never meet again. We mean nothing to each other. I must eat and smile and make polite conversation.*

And with the discipline of years, she turned to Brian with what Jake called 'Sara's velvet smile'.

'How was the cricket?'

Brian looked at her over his glass of milk and took one more swallow before answering. His deliberation shook Sara a little. Then with beads of milk trembling at the corners of his mouth, he said politely but unresponsively. 'Top-hole. We won.'

'I'm afraid I don't know very much about cricket. If it had been baseball, I could be of some use to you.'

'You mean American "Rounders"? I saw it in the news-reel on the flicks.'

'Did you like it?'

'I never tried it.'

He went back to his scones and milk and Sara thought he was the most self-contained little boy she had ever met. Then he looked up again.

'You're an American, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Sara.

'We had heaps of American sailors here during the war. They all seemed very friendly and jolly.' He paused and looked at her; an odd, searching look. 'I thought *all* Americans were friendly and jolly.'

Sara felt dangerous waters swirling round her. 'I think it was because they were sailors. You remember how people always say a "jolly old tar"—and a tar means a sailor.'

'Yes. I know that. Everyone both in Cornwall knows that.'

'Brian!' Kay's soft, protesting voice broke in. Then she turned to Sara. 'If you don't know a Cornishman you don't know an Englishman. They're born with the sea in their eyes.'

Brian continued to look at Sara as he spoke, and how polite the little voice was! 'I didn't mean, not friendly. I meant, not jolly.'

'Miss Scott has been ill,' said Kay. 'And people don't feel very jolly then. Remember when you were ill last year—'

'Yes. I do remember.' He turned to Sara with a child's delight in remembered sorrows. 'My legs ached so, and it used to hurt my eyes just to look. It's horrid to be ill. Your throat is always dry and your head is always hot; and no matter how often your pillow is turned, it still has lumps in it. I was most awfully ill, wasn't I, Mum? Were you most awfully ill, Miss Scott?'

'The doctor thought so.'

'What made you ill?'

'I—I ran out into the rain, without a coat——' *for your letter, Kay . . . Mark's letter to you . . . running and stumbling and falling in the street, tearing my stockings . . . my knees cut and bleeding . . . until I found Mrs. Bunker and cried, "Give it to me, give it to me, I must have it!" . . . And then the blind journey back with the letter, feeling its weight like a stone in my hand!*

'And then what?' came Brian's voice.

'And then I came back and stayed in my wet clothes——' *shivering in my cold kitchen . . . steaming the letter open . . . sweating with guilt and shame . . . and then my insides churning at the first words I read . . . the only words I read . . . "My darling Kay"!*

'Was that all? Just getting wet? I get wet heaps of times without being ill—'

He knows! He knows, Sara said to herself. He knows my misery and my wretchedness and my heartbreak; the secret which I am hugging to myself. And she turned away from that bright avian eye, as round as a robin's, shrinking from its searching look, from the prying fingers of that bright bird-like mind. She wanted to cry out . . . *I was ill from love and from death! From pain and shock and shame! And longing for what was never mine. For what is here in this house. And from grief, which is not in this house!*

And anger shook her again, as it had in the road outside the gate. Mark's roof housed a wife who didn't grieve for him and a child who didn't resemble him. She felt that it was a betrayal of Mark for the boy to have inherited none of his father's vivid darkness; his sombre, brooding warmth; his quick responsiveness and his unexpected gaiety. This was Kay's child. Yet at the very instant that she said these words to herself, Brian reached out for his knife and fork to eat from his newly filled plate, and his hands were so like Mark's that it was with difficulty that she kept her own hands locked in her lap, lest she lay them on his.

Something of the intensity of her thought must have reached him for he looked up and held the look for a long while. And Sara felt her measure being taken by that clear blue eye. Then he repeated patiently and politely what he had said before—what seemed years before: 'Was that all that made you ill? Just sitting about in wet clothes?'

And Sara realized that she had not answered him, and knew that she must. My work! she thought, I'll talk about my work. And it stood out like an island in a torrent; like safe stepping-stones in a rushing stream. First one foot, and then the other; first one word and then the other. And with every step, every word, she would feel safe from those dangerous waters. Her work was the one impersonal thing in Sara's life. It stood as straight as a column, chaste and strong. All the tendrils of her life curled around it like a vine, seeking strength and protection from its hard, glistening

core. Her work was at once a refuge and a delight. It was where her *mind* functioned, disciplined and unfaltering.

Her voice was almost gay as she said, 'Oh, I had done a lot of foolish things. You know, not sleeping enough, sitting about in smoky rooms, working too late——'

'Working at what?' Brian asked.

'Well, I write. Things for the newspapers.'

'Really?' said Kay. 'How interesting.'

And Brian said, 'May I have some more macaroni, Mum?' And he turned to his mother with a look of such warmth and sweetness that the air was like sunlight between them. And Sara thought, 'Why, he isn't cold, he isn't detached!' And then, with a shock, 'But he doesn't like me!'

And then, a second later: 'And I don't like *him*!'

★ ★ ★

The wireless hummed and sputtered at first, then grew clear and melodious as the music of some old folk-dances came over, bringing the scent of a village green into the room.

The simple meal had been quickly and quietly cleared away and now Kay was seated in the low slipper chair, knitting; not with deadly clicking efficiency but a steady, tranquil rhythm as if it reflected her own quiet, steadfast mind.

Brian was absorbed in winding tape around the blade of his cricket bat, his blond head bent over the work, his hands moving deftly and delicately; and Sara thought once again how like Mark's they were, filled with a restless energy which was nowhere else reflected in his sturdy, compact little body. She felt the child stir under her gaze and looked away defensively, not wanting to meet those oddly searching eyes.

But, whichever way she turned, she was forced to look either at Mark's photograph, or the doors leading to his study, or his empty chair. Yet, with all these reminders that he had once lived in this house, Sara could not picture his life here and wondered if, like herself, he had been an alien under this roof; or if some strong and secret tie had bound him to this woman and this child. Something teased at her mind, some-

thing she could not fathom. Just as she could not fathom the sense of hidden strength she felt in Kay.

She tried to make herself see Mark here but, even though the imprint of his head had left a hollow in the leather chair, she could not see his lean body stretched out in it as she could see him in her London flat. And suddenly Mark became a stranger, someone lost to her; the effort to place him here had disturbed her memory and she grew confused and uneasy and longed for the moment when she might open those curtained glass doors and go to his room. Perhaps what she found there would effect a fusion between the Mark she had known and the Mark who had lived here. But she couldn't go yet—not yet; and fearful lest she lose what she had, her mind rushed back for refuge to No. 11 South Street.

And so strong was her will and her imagination that she could hear, over the sound of the Cornish sea, the intimate beat of the little coal fire which had triumphed so valiantly over the London fog which seeped through the windows. She could see her wireless and herself looking up from her typewriter to read the dial of her clock which had its alarm set sharp at nine, so that she wouldn't miss a moment of Mark's broadcast; then, the broadcast over, turning quickly back to the writing of her column, SARA SCOTT SAYS, so that it might be finished before she heard the rasp of Mark's key in the lock; the key he had taken out of her trembling hand that very first day. And she felt once again that rising tide of excitement, for never once in all the months they had been together had reunion, no matter after how short a period, been other than delight. Sara closed her eyes, letting it all surge back, feeling herself once more happy and warm and secure in the little island she and Mark had made for themselves. She could see the flowered chintz curtains, the bits of silver gleaming softly in the fire-light, and Mrs. Bunker tidying up the room while Sara worked, watching her with her wise little eyes. . . 'I was reading some of that you wrote, madam; and I was thinking, no matter what happens to a woman, men seem to have a lot to do with it. It's like taking a nice bowl of h'eggs and scrambling them

with a fork. That's wot a man does to your life. Did you ever try to unscramble a h'egg, madam?' . . . And less than twenty-four hours after these simple and profound words had been spoken, Sara had filled her flat with spring flowers for the most important moment of her life! She could see them clustered in bowls and vases, so crisp and sweet, and she could hear herself saying to Mark—'I'm never going to leave you'—and going into his arms with that sense of a world shut out. And she could hear the music to which they had danced, while she held off her wonderful news with such a buoyant heart. The melody sang through her mind until it seemed to come from every corner of the room; until it beat in upon her as the waves of the sea beat in upon the rocks. She felt drowned in it and fought for breath as she half-stumbled to her feet and cried out, 'No! No! Not any more! Stop it, please!'

Then the flat in South Street melted away and she found herself standing in this cottage room, her hands flung out protestingly as the music poured from the wireless. So deeply had she been lost in memory she had failed to hear the change-over of the programme. She saw the child's startled face and Kay's sympathetic one and tried to speak, but no words came. Then Kay put down her knitting and crossed over to the wireless and turned it off and Sara sat gratefully down in her chair and drank in the silence.

'Bedtime, Brian,' said Kay, but by the child's quick glance at the clock, Sara knew he was being sent up early. He opened his lips to protest when Kay spoke again.

'Bedtime—and brush your teeth,' and a sensitive something passed between them; then Brian put away his cricket bat and went upstairs.

Kay picked up her knitting and Sara kept her eyes fixed on the even movement of her hands, using its calm rhythm as a metronome to steady her own breathing, until she could speak.

'I'm sorry—so very sorry. But that music——'

'Reminded you of someone?'

'Yes.'

'Someone you—lost?'

Sara gave a little gasp and could only stare at Kay.

'I know the signs,' she went on quietly and looked full at Sara with her open, steady gaze. 'I think the most difficult part of losing someone—someone you've loved—is being taken off-guard. Like that music. One feels so defenceless.'

Sara had no words. The image of Mark trembled between them like reflections in a mirror. Kay went on speaking.

'I'd like to tell you something which helped me. Perhaps it will help you. Don't resist grief. Let it have its way with you. If little things reopen the wound, perhaps it needs to bleed once more before it can heal. Let it do its worst. Then something within you says, "Very well, then. I can bear that." And you feel strong once more and the most dreadful part is over.'

When Kay had stopped speaking the silence was almost touchable and Sara felt that there was a bond between them as visible as a spider's web and of the same delicate, clinging texture. And the thought swept through her, *I must leave! I mustn't stay here, not even for one night!* When she spoke her voice was harsh with humility.

'Look, Mrs. Trevor,' Sara heard her voice say. 'I really have no business being here. I mean, I feel that I'm intruding. I can find another place. I'm sure I can.'

She rose as she spoke and Kay, too, stood and faced her with genuine distress in her voice.

'I've made you feel unwelcome! It's not like me to have spoken so. I can't think why——' Her voice trailed off and her face wore a puzzled look. 'Perhaps I thought, something said by a stranger to a stranger——' Again her voice broke off and she added almost thoughtfully. 'It's odd, you know, but I felt your grief. Perhaps in the way children and cripples recognize each other.'

And Sara thought, *my* grief. And hers? Has it had its way with her? Has it done its worst in these short months? Is the most dreadful part really over? And that confused anger rose in her again. It's too soon! *It's too soon!* Then she realized with a start that Kay had gone on speaking.

'We're really starting out on our own, Brian and I. I

should be so ashamed to have my first attempt at taking in guests a failure.'

'If you're quite certain——'

'Quite.'

Yes, Sara thought, she would always be certain. No doubts, no torments. Safety and security were written on her face. Here in this little backwater her life had flowed between familiar banks and been lapped around by gentle waters. Try as hard as she might, Sara could not envisage that tranquil face ravaged by grief. She could not, even with her writer's imagination, put tears in those eyes or pain around that smiling mouth. And she gave a deep, despairing sigh.

Kay looked up quickly and put her knitting aside.

'You look so very tired. Wouldn't you like an early night?'

'Yes, I should. I *am* dreadfully tired.' Yet the fatigue melted from her bones as she turned her steps towards Mark's room.

Sara had made a pretence of unpacking while Kay had put on the lights and drawn the curtains, but she had no intention of going to bed. No intention of wasting these few hours in sleep. She had refused Kay's offer of a hot-water bottle—'It turns quite chilly here at night, even in summer,' Kay had said. But Sara was burning with impatience to be alone.

Now it was past midnight and she sat, unmindful of the cold, with Mark's books spilling over the desk, over her lap, over her mind. Her eyes had skimmed past the row of text-books and the volumes of history which jostled each other for place on the crowded shelves; past the books on fishing and the sailing of small-craft, until she saw titles which were more familiar to her and with which she associated Mark. Then her hands had reached out eagerly for Emerson, Montaigne, Lamb, Shakespeare, Johnson, Dryden, Bacon—those aristocrats of the mind. She had leafed through first one book, then another and another, until the words came tum-

bling over her like an avalanche of broken sound and blurred meaning; the grave and the gay, the relevant and the irrelevant; the thoughts which seemed like Mark and those which were alien to her knowledge of him. There was no chronology, nothing to tell her if he had marked his passage before that, or that before another. No way in which to relate anything to time or mood or place. Youth or maturity? Regret or desire?

Had he been drawn to the New England fire of Emerson before the cool, pellucid writing of Montaigne—or after? Did Samuel Johnson's pithy sayings belong to the time before his marriage—or since? When had he read and loved gentle, witty Charles Lamb? And what had made him mark the lines, 'Coleridge holds that a man cannot have a pure mind who refuses apple dumplings'? And to write in the margin, William Morris's 'I always bless God for having made anything as strong as an onion'? And Kipling, what was he doing leaning against John Donne's *Devotions* on one side and *Restoration Drama* on the other? Sara could not imagine Mark reading the ribald Congreve with zest. And yet—and yet! Then the Letters of John Keats which she herself so loved, with its underlined passage—'Give me books, fruit, french wine and fine weather and a little music out of doors played by somebody I do not know'—that must have belonged to his romantic youth. But did it? And Marcus Aurelius—'Reflecting on all this, think nothing great, save only to act as thy nature leadeth and to suffer what the common nature bringeth.' Had he known the complexities of his own nature when he had marked these lines? Or sensed that 'what common nature bringeth' is death?

Sara opened a complete Shakespeare, its leather binding rubbed with use, its pages read and re-read, its lines marked and smudged; and a series of unfamiliar quotations met her eye: 'Fire that's closest kept burns most of all.' *What fire? What fire, Mark?*—her heart cried out. 'Wilt thou reach stars, because they shine on thee?' And Sara could feel his straining, upraised hand. 'There is no time so miserable but a man may be true.'

Oh, Mark, true to what? True to whom? To yourself—or to Kay? Not to me, for I didn't exist when you marked these lines. There is nothing here to foreshadow your love for me—and love it was! And nothing to reflect your love for Kay—yet you had professed that it was an integral part of your life.

Nothing here about love at all! No passages marked. Had he found love so completely—or was it something secret and separate, not to be noted, not to be recorded? There must be other, more intimate books somewhere in this house, she thought; and she felt cheated, shut out, as she thrust these from her with an angry gesture.

Her hands and body were suddenly cold and she put the books back in their places with numbed and fumbling movements. These hours she had so looked forward to had left her barren and denuded. She could not put together the whole man.

Try as she would, no clear picture came. She had gained and she had lost. Had she exchanged shadow for substance—or substance for shadow? Had Mark receded into the past—that past which was not hers? And her mind shrank from the answer.

All the books were in order again and she stood back and looked at them as if they were enemies who had betrayed her. They had given her nothing. Nothing. No answers. Only tormenting questions. She shivered with the cold and regretted her fur coat waiting for her in her ship's cabin. It was too late to think of going to bed; she must be up much too early to get to Plymouth. And yet she was suddenly stupefied with sleep. She longed for it as a drunkard longs for drink. She turned towards the day-bed which invited her slow-moving body, which felt like a run-down clock. Slower. Slower. Slower. The same heaviness of limb assailed her as when she had started up the hill. The sense of moving through water with a weary, thrusting gait.

Perhaps if she washed her face it would relieve this lethargy. She went into the little bathroom and, as she pushed open the door, something soft and bulky prevented its complete opening. She went in and closed the door behind her, and

saw a man's woollen dressing-gown, thick and soft and comforting, hanging there forgotten. She stretched out her hand and touched its softness and felt every nerve in her body respond to it. She took the dressing-gown down from its hook and it lay against her like a caress. With sudden desire she thrust her arms into the sleeves and wrapped its thickness about her and drew the cord tight around her waist, and felt a flood of warmth and safety and protection pour through her.

She went slowly back into the room and with her hand moving as in a dream, turned off the lights and opened the curtains and felt the sea air surge in. To-morrow, she thought, to-morrow I shall be far out at sea. Homeward bound. Away from this island. Away from Mark. Both to be buried fathoms deep. Fathoms deep. And as she lay down on the day-bed, the words became an echoing sigh like the sea air. And she sank into sleep.

CHAPTER XII

HIGH above the East river, Carter Reynolds sat out on the terrace of his apartment, waiting for word that Sara's ship was ready to let its passengers disembark. He had had his paper checking every hour of the last twenty-four, hoping the ship would not hold up its arrival until morning, for there had been delays. He wanted to meet Sara again in the shelter and intimacy of darkness. A bleak daybreak arrival and all her defences would be up. And yet, even as he said the words, he thought that the time for defences between them had passed. That the days after Mark's death when Sara had held on to him blindly had effected a strange union between them; bound them closer to each other. Even though she wept for another man, it was clinging to his own hand and drawing on his own strength and love.

And then had come her illness. Her fortunate illness. Reynolds had never thought to hear with relief a doctor's pronouncement of pneumonia; but he knew that only the failure of Sara's bodily health could halt the ravaging of her

heart. When she had recovered from the one, he hoped she would have recovered from the other; at least have made one blurred image of the two, superimposing them so that in memory grief and fever, mental anguish and bodily pain, would all become one. And she would convalesce as from a single blow. When the first danger was over, and it had never been very great, the hardest thing Reynolds had ever made himself do was to leave Sara in the nursing home in London. But she convinced him that now she must go through the rest of it alone; and from her voice over the telephone just before she had sailed, he felt she had been right. He smiled as his memory caught the echo of her voice. How it had warmed and comforted him! And it had been sensible of her to take a slow boat home. Sensible, too, to go down the day before sailing. He would be glad when she had put England safely behind her.

He got up restlessly and poured fresh coffee from the flask on the table, strong and black, one ear cocked towards the telephone. He had a man stationed at the dock who would let him know minutes before the gang-plank was raised. Reynolds couldn't bear the thought of standing about watching the ship make its wavering way to the dock, the tugs panting and barking like terriers at the heels of a patient hound; the tying up, the unloading of luggage from the hold, the passengers peering palely from the rails searching for dim, familiar faces. Not in his present state of excitement. And Sara hated standing about being waved at. She'd stay in her cabin until the rush of passengers and the shrill cries of greeting had subsided. Then they'd meet. His heart gave an undisciplined bound as he thought of that meeting and he sought to calm it in a review of the preparations he had made for her home-coming.

Flowers for her apartment. A few cut flowers, but potted plants mostly. Sara liked to watch things grow. She didn't maintain an elaborate establishment such as his own. A hotel apartment with impersonal hotel service, overlooking the green of Central Park. Reynolds had never known a woman who shrank so from acquiring dependents or syco-

phants. The floor maid, a taciturn Frenchwoman, kept Sara's clothes in the same exquisite order as Sara kept her life. Or, *had* kept it, before this last devastating experience. Reynolds was glad that Sara lived as she did; he wanted her real home to be his. He had stood in her living-room thinking how much and how little it revealed of the real Sara.

The suite was beautifully furnished, for Sara had excellent and highly individual taste and was no slave to period. French provincial lived happily with Sheraton satinwood, and Georgian silver with Irish Waterford crystal and thin Bohemian glass. Everything in the rooms had been collected by Sara on her various journeys, many of which Reynolds had shared. So each held a memory, an experience.

And scattered among her own possessions were the few important gifts she had accepted from him: paintings, mostly. Not moderns. A charming snow-scene of old Vienna—a Constable-like painting of a water-mill with its tranquil pool; an American primitive, the portrait of a lean, lantern-jawed man who reminded Sara of Alvin, whom she would never cease to love. And in her bedroom, the ivory toilet set with its entwined S.S. initials deliberately set slightly off centre, so that an R might one day be added. Specially bound volumes of Sara's favourite bedside books; and on the wall facing her bed, a Degas painting of one of his deliciously awkward little ballet girls. Sara was always drawn to the tender gawkiness of youth; its vulnerable sweetness; its capacity for grace and pain; its touching fatigue, as if a year of hope were lived in every moment of effort. She always said she could feel the aching muscles and the strained arms and the tight little arches of the feet in their ballet slippers. Arches which had to hold up not only a young body with its stretching tendons and muscles, but a heart, full of desire and ambition and fear; that frightening composite of the young.

Reynolds had left after putting champagne in the refrigerator and, as he had closed the door, hoping that Sara would not spend many more nights here. He felt that Sara should no longer live alone. And he knew that he *could* not.

Then to her office. No flowers here. Sara had always

kept her office uncluttered and austere. He could hear her protesting laugh: 'Please, Carter dear—not flowers in my office! Not that home-like touch!' So he had contented himself with briefing her latest secretary. Unlike most successful women, Sara had shunned devoted, slavish service; so she engaged a new secretary every year, explaining, 'It's not healthy for women to lead other women's lives. They are either jealous of my job, which is bad for *them*—or they worship it, which is bad for *me*.' So, each year, clever girls from the various women's colleges found their way to Sara's office; and, when their year was up, went on to other good or better jobs. Starting with Sara Scott was a recommendation in itself and opened many doors to them. Sometimes they married; but, either way, they remained Sara's good friends, and Sara kept her life uncluttered by either jealousy or worship.

All this flowed through Reynolds's mind as he sat, his eyes on the river. And he thought of that other night in London when he had watched a dark river moving slowly to the sea. But there was a moon to-night and the air was gentle and full of hope. And he felt that now he, like the river, had a destination.

With this experience behind her, Reynolds believed, Sara would be ready to fulfil her life. This delayed romantic love had been the unconscious block which had kept Sara from marriage with him. Reynolds was not a jealous man and the kind of love Sara had given Mark was not the kind he wanted from any woman. He thought to himself, 'It would scare hell out of me!' He wanted a love rooted deep and strong in mutual knowledge and mutual respect and a great deal of loving regard. He was a man who had always wanted women in his life, but for the past ten years he had wanted only one. Sara. He wanted her living under his roof, eating at his table, sleeping in his bed.

As he sat feeling the warm September air against his face, he thought—perhaps another month. Time for her to readjust to New York. Then they could be married quietly and go out to Arizona for the winter. He knew just the place. Sun-soaked and with great, strong mountains. All

the rugged strength and warmth of America. Reynolds was not a sentimental man, but he loved his country passionately and felt that only a return to her own land, with its pulsing vitality, could restore Sara to spiritual health.

He looked once more at the river which flowed softly past in the light of the mild moon and thought again, *Yes, at last I know where I'm going; where we're going. My life has a destination.*

And then the telephone rang. The boat would be letting its passengers disembark within the half-hour. Reynolds was out of his apartment and in his car before he was aware of having moved. Sara was actually coming home!

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The dark hull of the ship loomed above the dock and passengers were beginning to teeter down the gang-plank. Nice timing, Reynolds thought with that part of his mind which liked the patterns to mesh smoothly; then found himself, without quite knowing why, walking swiftly past the A's and B's of the alphabetical sections reserved for the passengers' luggage, until he came to the S's. There were masses of trunks and boxes under this heading which Reynolds took in almost at a glance; but not until he saw Sara's little French Vuitton trunks with their interlaced initials 'S.S.' did he realize, with a flutter of fear, how he had needed this definite confirmation of her return.

He stood gazing at the trunks with deep satisfaction spreading through him. He could visualize their contents: the fine, soft tweeds, the cashmere sweaters, the creamy silk blouses, the beige gloves which Sara bought by the dozen the beautiful simple clothes she always wore with such elegance. Only once had he ever seen her dishevelled—the day he had had to tell her that Mark was dead. He closed his mind against that memory and turned and went back to stand where he could watch the gang-plank.

Reynolds was relaxed now and he looked with a newspaper man's eye at the passengers as they continued to come down, enjoying their affectionate greetings with those who

had come to meet them, savouring his own meeting still to come. Then with that meeting only minutes away, he felt the first stirrings of uncertainty. How should he meet her? What should be his first words? He had always embraced Sara after an absence; kissed her fondly, held her close, his body saying how deeply he had missed her. Should he do that now? Would she shrink from the familiar embrace? Reynolds didn't feel he could quite bear that. And yet, if his greeting altered from the customary, wouldn't that in itself be a reminder of what was now past and imply that it still cast its shadow upon the future?

He felt confused, schoolboyish, and it angered him. Damn it all, it was bad enough for Sara to have taken that desperate excursion back into her youth without him following suit! *I'd better be my age. I'll walk up to her and put my arms about her tight—and she'll know she's home!*

He took a decisive step forward, then stopped abruptly and stared at the gang-plank. It was empty. No one was coming down. No one at all. The passengers had drifted away towards their piles of luggage and the feverish activity had subsided. Even the ship had taken on an air of detachment as if it disclaimed any association with the people who had only minutes past lived so intimately within it. One more journey completed; one more lot of human beings disgorged; and Sara not among them!

The purser was not very helpful. Yes, Miss Scott was on the passenger list but she had not sailed. Her luggage? When she had cancelled her passage at the last moment there hadn't been time to get her trunks out of the hold. Only time to take her hand luggage from her cabin where it had been placed the day before. No, he knew no reason. Just a telegram. From where had it been sent? He was afraid he couldn't remember that. So much confusion on sailing day. He hoped Mr. Reynolds understood. They had been sorry not to have Miss Scott aboard. She had travelled with them before. A cruise. Perhaps Mr. Reynolds remembered. The West Indies.

Reynolds forced himself to make all the proper replies; tried to keep the bitter anxiety out of his voice and face, as he saw some of it reflected in the purser's eyes. Yes, indeed, he remembered. Splendid cruise. Now that the war was over they'd be having cruises again. No, nothing more the purser could do. There'd probably be a message at the office.

But he knew there would be no message. He even wondered, as he turned away, if he had really expected to find Sara on the ship. If his homecoming preparations had not been those one makes to encourage a patient lying ill in hospital, when all the while the scent of funeral flowers hangs in the air and all one's cheerful words are spoken across a bier. An icy sadness swept over him and the soft September night grew harsh and unfriendly and the mild moon took on a ghostly pallor.

On the way up-town Reynolds pulled his car in to the kerb where a cheap neon sign proclaimed a bar. He went into the fusty, third-rate place and ordered whisky. Any whisky. Usually so fastidious about what he ate or drank, he took the glass as it skidded towards him across the scratched mahogany bar without troubling to ask what kind or brand it was. He only wanted to feel its raw bite in his throat; to wash down the unaccustomed bitterness that filled his mouth.

He asked for a second one and the bartender, for reply, shoved the bottle towards him. Reynolds poured the crude drink, thinking of the chilled bottle of delicate champagne waiting in Sara's apartment, and it gave him a sort of savage pleasure to thus do violence to his palate. He looked about the grimy room. This was the sort of joint he and Jake used to wind up in after a hard night, in the early days of the paper.

'Jake!' The name sprang to his lips before he knew he had spoken aloud. He must find Jake!

He slapped some money down and left the second drink untouched. Once back in his car he turned it towards his apartment, and the telephone.

Hours passed. Slow, cold hours. Jake had been moving

fast these last days of the war in the Pacific, and with VJ day scarcely past he was one jump ahead of his cables. But Reynolds meant to reach him if it took all night. While he waited for the call to come through he tried to recall precisely what Sara had said when she had telephoned from London.

' . . . I *need* to come back. And I need the job . . . I'm taking a nice, slow boat . . . I'll arrive rested and relaxed . . . I'm well, very well . . . Jake says I'm back to normal . . . you've been sweet, giving me all this time . . . I'll be for ever grateful . . . '

So *grateful* that she hadn't even sailed! So *grateful* that she hadn't told him she wasn't arriving! Even if she were ill, she had been able to send word to the boat and get some of her luggage. She could have sent word to him. But she *wasn't* ill; he felt certain of that. At least, not physically. Anxiety and anger fought a battle within him—a battle that was still unwon when the sky grew dappled with the early morning light and Jake answered the telephone in Tokyo.

It was a wretched connexion and Jake's voice bubbled and blurred as he answered Reynolds's eager questions. The replies only told Reynolds what he already knew, save for one thing: that Sara had intended spending the night in Plymouth before the boat sailed. Jake shared his distress and had no explanation to offer for Sara's having cancelled her passage at the last moment; but as Reynolds hung up, he felt with a vague uneasiness that Jake's surprise at her failure to arrive did not quite match his own. There seemed to be reservations in his voice, though Reynolds tried to convince himself that it was only the bad connexion. But he knew Jake as well as he knew Sara and, for the first time in his life, he felt that both of them had failed him.

He looked at the clock and decided it wasn't worth while going to bed, though his eyes were grainy with fatigue and strain. So he tubbed and shaved and, by the time his morning coffee was brought in, he was ready for another day. A day which was flat and stale and overlaid with a film of worry as pervasive and stifling as dust.

Once at his desk he put through a call to his London office,

but even with the speed of telephones and cables it was a matter of days before he had a check on all the hotels in Plymouth. No Sara Scott had been registered in any of them either the night before the boat had sailed or any other. It was a dead-end and, without subjecting Sara's movements to all manner of wild conjecture, he could do no more. He would wait and use a habit of mind he had acquired early in life. He called it 'leaving a door open': deliberately making one part of his mind highly receptive and expectant. That there would be some clue to Sara's failure to sail he had no doubt, but only by this oblique and passive method would he find it.

CHAPTER XIII

SARA awakened, as she had every morning for weeks past now, as the first light touched the window facing the day-bed. It woke her as quietly as the fresh sea air which stirred the curtains like a breath. Apart from lifting her eyelids, she was motionless. She had learned that if she remained completely still, imprisoning the lingering lassitude of sleep within her body, she could release her mind and send it on that beautiful, dizzying, winging flight into the past.

Each day while the village was muffled in sleep and thick with silence, broken only by the sighing surge of the sea, she lay like this. It was the special time she had set aside to reconstruct, to rearrange, to count over, as a miser counts gold, the things she had discovered. Carefully, carefully, she put them together, adding each day the new thing from the day before. And slowly the picture grew and began to take form and put on substance.

At first it had been only thin stuff; teasing bits and glimpses. The day when she had stood on the edge of the village green during cricket practice and had seen Mr. Penworth, the Vicar, watching Brian with an approving eye. Turning to Sara he had said, 'He's a sound little chap. Glad to see he's not nervy.'

'Should he be?'

'Well, the war, you know. And his father.' Mr. Penworth's face had softened as he said this last.

'Did you know his father?' Sara had found herself asking.

'Know Mark? Most of his life, I should say. Charming, gay fellow. Hard to think of him as dead.'

The adjectives still echoed in Sara's ears: charming—yes. A dark, brooding charm. But—gay? In spite of flashes of wit and moments of excited good humour and always a nice sense of fun—gay was not the word. Not as Sara had known him. Yet the Vicar had used it so spontaneously. And she felt an unreasoning jealousy that Mark had possessed a quality unknown to her, unperceived by her. Another side of the coin. Then she had realized that the Vicar had gone on speaking: 'I suppose I shouldn't have said "dead" in that mournful fashion. Not when it's my business to preach about the joys and glories of eternal life *after* death. But the human side of me does resent the loss of those who have a true appetite and relish for life. The best and the worst of it. Mark was so forthright. Never shirked anything. Took it all in his stride. Perhaps one thing was pleasanter than another, like parts of a meal. What do they say are the four cardinal tastes? Sweet, sour, salt and bitter. But all are food—all are nourishment. So few can take life like that. But Mark could.'

Oh, thought Sara, if all this about him be true, what must he not have suffered in shirking the truth those last months of his life? Concealing it from me—concealing it from Kay. And another facet was added to his character. First 'gay'—and now 'forthright'. How many sides could there be to a coin?

And another day, the encounter with the old fisherman whom she had seen crouched by his boat on the shingle beach, mending nets. Brian had gone racing by with some of the village lads and the old man had called out in his lilting Cornish speech:

'Ah, there, young Trevor—when are you going to sail a boat with me, like your dad?'

Brian had stopped dead. 'Mum says next summer, perhaps, Mr. Polworth. I'll be eight then.'

'Eight,' the old fisherman had answered with fine scorn
our dad could sail proper by then.'

But my dad was pretty special,' Brian had replied.

Aye, that he was. Special at doing—and special at daring.

Daring? Yes, in a sense that Sara could believe. Had they not met over a job of daring? And had it not been this same quality which had led him to reply, when she had asked where he was going after that first meeting, 'With you'? But he had not been daring in its conventional sense; foolhardy and ignorant of danger. Brave. That was the better word. But how many words go to make a man? And the picture had become diffused and muddled and she had felt Mark receding through the mists of conjecture.

Still, nearly every day brought its own discovery. That evening when, quite without warning, thrusting her hand deep into the bookcase to draw out a heavy volume which had slipped back, she had come upon half a dozen photographs of ruined temples and sculptured bodies, imperishable in their mutilated beauty. These struck an unexpected note. Sara knew Mark had been a classical scholar, but art, or the past, was something they had never discussed. And she knew he had never been to the Mediterranean.

She sat gazing at the superbly rounded arms and torsos of the statues, at the soaring columns of the Parthenon and the Forum and the Temple of Delphi, the marble worn by wind and sun and time, and felt as if she were breathing in all the glory of ancient Greece. Scribbled on the backs of the photographs were remembered fragments: *submission to destiny, therein is Greece—the sleeping stones—the fusion of matter and thought—the best of men left here the best that was in them*—and a few words in delicate Greek script.

Then Sara had suddenly remembered a bit of almost shapeless modelling clay serving as a paper-weight on the desk. She crossed to it and picked it up and saw, still showing on the clay, the prints of fingers. Were they Mark's? She held the clay in her hand as if a message might beat in it, like a pulse. What was it meant to be? What dream did it hold imprisoned within its lumpy form? She let the clay

fall from her hand with a sense of despair. Would the picture of Mark never be complete? It was like working out a jig-saw puzzle when the odd pieces refuse to become part of the pattern and one sat staring at a scrap of blue and saying, 'Is that a bit of sea, or a patch of sky?' Always that awareness of the missing piece.

She had turned once again to the photographs. If Mark had lived they might have gone to Greece and Italy. Sara could picture them wandering through the lovely ruins of Hadrian's Villa, or resting under the olive trees eating cheese and bread and drinking golden wine. Or standing, hand in hand, staring at the Parthenon against the blinding blue of a Grecian sky. Mark would have loved the burning sun and she could see his thin, eager face browned by its heat. They would have brought back photographs like these and looked at them together and said, 'Do you remember that spring we spent in Athens—that summer we spent in Rome? The morning we ate honey from Mount Hymettus—the night we listened to the nightingale sing?'

All at once the loss of that which she had never had became almost unbearable and she turned her mind quickly to the things she knew about Mark as a child turns to a pocketful of shining pebbles picked up on the beach; only bits of stone, but treasures seen with the eye of the mind.

Then she had become aware of the sun slanting across her closed eyelids and knew that the time for the village to stir from its sleep was drawing near. She would lie and listen to the small, early sounds, all of which had become familiar to her since the first morning she had awakened in this room, knowing in her very bones that the ship would sail without her.

Casting her mind back, Sara asked herself for the hundredth time why had she never mentioned to Kay that she was sailing to America the next day? That she should be awakened early? She could not remember having consciously omitted it. Had the longing, the intention to remain, already been born? If so, what then had been her reluctance to enter the house? Had it been a warning that, once having entered, she would be powerless to leave? And to which

of those twin companions had she been listening all the while? Dread or delight? Danger or desire?

And Kay had asked no questions about why she had happened to stay on, beyond an apology for not having awakened her. And Sara had murmured something vague in reply, letting the mistaken thought take root. How could she explain the happenings of that night? Having stumbled to the day-bed to fall upon it, stupefied with sleep; and then that confused sense of being sucked backward in time as if into a swirling funnel, its walls growing narrower and narrower, spinning her down and down. Fathoms deep. Fathoms deep.

And as if through swirling water she had begun to see, to reconstruct, the life which had gone on within these walls, in this village, in this little world. A clock with its hands flying backwards. A calendar with its leaves blowing in the wind. That heady sense of living in reverse. Building the past as one builds a house of cards, each card resting perilously against its neighbour; one incautious breath could bring the structure tumbling down.

Sara kept her eyes closed against the encroaching sun as she waited for the first break in the sheltering silence. This was Mark's little world waking up.

Ah, there it came! First the chimes, then the striking of the clock on the church tower. Sara had grown very fond of the small church which clung so precariously, yet with dignity, to the side of the steep road overlooking the sea. And she liked going there to services on Sunday. All the village turned out, even the fishermen in their Sunday clothes and boots, stiff from disuse. Seeing them in church gave Sara a sense of comfort and continuity. With their weather-worn, bearded faces, they might have come straight in from the Sea of Galilee. They always made Sara think of the psalm, 'They that go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters. These men see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep.' And as Sara scanned their faces she saw that their eyes had that far-off sight of the seafaring man, and she could imagine, in

peril on the water, their soft, Cornish voices crying, 'Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord; O Lord hear my voice!' And, judging by the number who turned up in church, the Lord had heard them all.

As the last stroke of the clock died away, Sara waited for the next expected sound. Delia, the golden Labrador who lived across the street, nosing open the gate. She was a great, gentle creature who always rushed out to greet the day with a menacing bark, then sat down on her plump, matronly haunches to observe the world, tongue hanging out and dripping with friendliness. Her owners, if anyone can be said to own a dog, were friends of Mark's and Kay's and the men had used her for a retriever on their 'shoots', as Sara had learned to call them, in the autumn. Mark had become a fine shot after his knee injury had made games difficult, and Sara could picture him returning home laden with pheasant and partridge and woodcock. They had eaten game together many times in London restaurants and yet he had never mentioned being a good shot and enjoying the sport. Perhaps because it was tied up in his mind with Kay and that part of his life had been sealed off, not to be spoken of, not to be recalled, when he and Sara were together.

The next sound was the chug-chug of the first tug-boat as it circled the little bay, then headed up the river. And, from the beach below, if one listened very carefully, one could hear the rasp of the pulleys as sails were being hoisted.

Then she heard the sound of the curate's bicycle which he oiled lovingly and which always squeaked. In America, Sara had always thought of a curate as something in an English novel which passed bread and butter and ate strawberries and drank tea in the garden. A disembodied character. But Peter Milford was nothing like that picture of a curate. Big and kind with strong, brown hands, he had been his school's best athlete and had won his rowing blue up at Cambridge. He and Mark had been close friends all their lives. It was he who had taken the memoria service which had been held for Mark in the little church. He still talked about Mark a great deal and Sara had been hand put to it to

conceal her astonishment when Peter told her that he and Mark had once contemplated taking Holy Orders together. Mark, a clergyman! And, yet, that odd dedicated look. And, of course, it was different here in England. A great many schoolmasters, and most school heads were clergymen. But it was another difficult piece to work into the puzzle.

The squeak of the bicycle grew more penetrating as Peter coasted down the hill, starting his sick calls at this early hour. Only the really serious ones, at this time of day, he had explained, for they've mostly had a rotten night and need a spot of cheering up to start the day. 'What do you *do*?' Sara had asked him. 'Oh, pray with them for a bit, then read the Bible. It's the only book most of them know.' And the old and the sick of the parish loved him, with his open laugh and his kind, clumsy hands holding their Bible as he read. Hands spread by the handling of the oars, as were their own by a lifetime of gripping hoe and scythe and plough. Or the ropes and tiller of a boat. It brought him closer to them.

Now a gate clicked. That would be Doctor Meade, a 'foreigner' in the local idiom, for he came from the next county. A Devonshire man. But his wife was Cornish and the village had accepted him as a promising 'newcomer'. This, after thirty years! The Meades had lost an only son in the war—another school-mate of Mark's—but kept their sorrow to themselves, and the house was full of fun and noise from their three handsome girls who were bursting with health and spirits. Sara suspected that the older one had been half in love with Mark, the way her eyes would turn to his picture whenever she entered the house. She ran a hacking stable with both good humour and good sense, and never spoke to anyone as lovingly as she spoke to a horse.

Mark's death had been a sad blow to Doctor Meade; it had been like losing a second son. They had played cribbage together in the evenings, Sara learned. Mark who, to her knowledge, never touched a card, save for poker. Cribbage seemed an old man's game to Sara; yet Mark seemed to have played it with zest.

The doctor's steps passed the house, for he kept his car in

a garage at the foot of the hill, as had Mark; the steep cobbled street was treacherous in wet weather. As his footsteps died away, Sara could imagine that it was Mark leaving the house on one of the days when he had early classes. Most of the schoolmasters lived in, Kay had once said; and when Mark was made a housemaster then they, too, would have to live in. But they would still have this house for the holidays, she had added contentedly. This house which held all that Sara would never have.

Sara had passed Mark's school one day on the bus. Getting off precipitantly at the next stop she had walked back and gone up the drive and pulled the bell at the front door. Pretending to have lost her way, she had caught a glimpse of stone-flagged corridors when the old servant had answered the bell. He had given her precise instructions to which she had listened not at all, seeing only Mark's figure walking down the hall and turning at the old oak staircase and vanishing from view. She came to with a start as she realized that the servant had finished speaking. She had managed a 'thank you' and had left, walking slowly past the playing-field and picturing it swarming with small boys. She would contrive another visit after the new term had begun; she could pretend to be inquiring for the child of a friend who needed a change of air. People were always moving about this tiny island seeking a change of air. Or perhaps Kay would have some reason to go. Sara wanted to see the classrooms, the dormitories, the boys themselves. Breathe the air which had been so intimate a part of Mark's daily life.

Her thoughts broke off as she heard the shrill whistle of the early morning train, the train which should have taken her to Plymouth that August day. She listened to it every morning, reflecting that it was the only train whistle she had ever heard in all her life without wanting to be on her way. But now all the restlessness had seeped out of her and she was content to lie here in this house which held her warm and swathed like a cocoon, her limbs bound to her sides and her mind closed to the knowledge that after the cocoon came wings and flight.

Suddenly feet raced down the hill: children darting out for a forbidden dip in the sea before breakfast. And then the clatter of the milk cart being pushed up the steep, cobbled street.

Sara opened her eyes for the first time and took in every object in the room with one eager glance and renewed delight. She never tired of waking and finding herself here and was wilfully blind to the dangers which she knew were dogging her footsteps. She thrust them into a dark corner of her mind. This was another day. Another shining pebble on the sand.

But now that her eyes were open, she realized that the too brilliant sun had grown overcast. Crossing to the window she could see thick, low clouds crouching against the hill. She leaned for a moment on the sill of the open window and breathed in the stormy air. There was a fascination in this Cornish weather; milder in winter than the rest of England, but shaken by sudden downpours of rain. Wind whipped against the house now and the waves were beating against the rocks. But the rocks would endure. It made Sara feel strong to think of them. The English had much to thank their changeable climate for, she reflected; it had given them their astonishing ability to adjust, almost hourly, to the vagaries of fate. It might rain in June, but the essence of June would remain unchanged.

Sara started to dress. The sound of the milkman's cart was her daily signal; she knew just how many stops he made and how long it would take him to reach Woodbine Cottage. Just as she knew the timetable of the house. And Mark's timetable.

As she reached for shoes and stockings and girdle she thought, I could keep a diary of the life I would have had here with Mark. I could make the entries out of all I have stored up.

Mark has early classes to-day but that means he'll be home by four and we'll have tea in the garden. Perhaps Peter will drop in. I must have cherry jam for him. We'll dine late. Mark likes to correct some of his class papers before dinner if no guests are coming. I'll watch him sitting at his desk as I cross back and forth, laying the table. We'll turn on the wireless when we have our coffee

and Mark will tell me the happenings of the day. I shan't have much to tell. The little doings of the village. A contented day, waiting for his return. If Doctor Meade has no urgent call, he'll stroll over for a game of cribbage and I'll enjoy watching Mark lose himself in the game. This quiet house, this fragrant garden, hold all the life I need.

Then she saw the first drops of rain strike against the glass and she changed the day, making another fanciful entry in the diary of her mind.

A rainy day. Good, sopping rain with no sign of a let-up. Mark had no classes and we slept late, then had our breakfasts on trays in front of the living-room fire and went through all the London periodicals which had come down the day before. We read to and at each other, finding agreement and disagreement equally enjoyable. Then Mark decided he'd get to work on his textbook, the one about history and geography being a combined course, and still in pyjamas and dressing-gown, he went into his study. I said I'd turn out the cupboards and then go for a walk, rain or no rain. The Head of Mark's school was coming to dinner with his wife and I did pheasant the way they do it at Chambord in New York. At least, all my expensive eating has taught me something! Dinner went well. I'm learning to talk to these people, but not too much. The Head's wife is quite wonderful in her way and contrives to look both dowdy and distinguished as only an English gentlewoman can. She's very good with all the small boys and no homesick lad ever went uncomfited. They left fairly early, as people do down here in the country, and Mark and I poked up the fire and he read some of his book to me. I had an idea or two, suggested very modestly, though—for I'm a wife now, not a commentator. Then we each had a beer. I think I'm getting fat, but I'm too happy to care. For I am happy—I am! Whoever said I couldn't be happy married to a schoolmaster and living in a cottage with roses over the door! That big world I used to live in has been devoured by this little world. I am beginning to find that peace can be exciting.

The voice of the milkman broke in, calling from the back door: 'Mrs. Trevor——' and, so real was the dream,

Sara very nearly answered; then caught herself and stood waiting for Kay's voice to come. But Brian spoke instead.

Good morning, Mr. Pawley—my Mum isn't up yet. She thinks she has a cold. But I'll put the milk in the fridge.

Sara stiffened instinctively, all the mists dissolving, as she listened to that contained little voice. She had had one hand outstretched towards the handle of her door, but now she dropped it to her side and backed away. She couldn't, simply couldn't face breakfast alone with Brian. He was the one consistently jarring note. The hostile piece of the puzzle. The one part of Mark's life to which she could not relate herself.

She turned her back on the door. Brian could manage his own simple breakfast. He often did in summertime. Kay encouraged him to be self-reliant. Porridge, kept on the back of the stove all night, milk, bread and jam. On the mornings when they all had breakfast together, there would be bacon or eggs from Sara's food parcels from America. She thought with satisfaction of the special cupboard in the pantry she kept filled with sugar, butter, coffee, eggs, bacon and ham and tins of rich Danish cream. It had not been difficult to explain that she herself had been ill and needed these foods—then to share with Kay and Brian the things which, in England, had become luxuries.

Sara surveyed the room which was now so jealously hers, and started to put it to rights while she waited for Brian to have his breakfast. She had never allowed Kay to wait on her—not in the least thing, save for the meals, and Sara often helped with those as well. As she shook out the blankets of the day-bed and started to make it afresh, she thought of how successfully she had made a wall in her mind, with Kay on one side of it and Mark on the other. They had, in her conscious mind, no connexion one with the other. She never saw Kay as Mark's wife. Never permitted herself to visualize that relationship. Only on those self-imposed terms could she have remained here.

She had come to like Kay—to like her almost more than any woman she had ever known. And Kay liked her; an

easy, undemanding friendship had grown up between them. There was something strong and true about Kay and no prying fingers to her mind. And an ability to live in and for other people without sacrificing one iota of her personal pride or dignity. Sara admired her without reservation. But she knew this was possible only because she had built that wall.

And though Kay, like most well-mannered Englishwomen, had great reticence, still, over morning cups of coffee and afternoon cups of tea, there had been little exchanges of surface experiences and easy, friendly talk. Sara paused, a blanket half-folded in her hands, as she remembered the time Kay had looked at her and said quite simply, 'I've liked having you here. I didn't know it, but I needed someone. It's been good for me not to be alone.'

There. Brian had finished with his breakfast and gone to the piano. Sara put the cover on the day-bed to the laboured precision of the child's practising. Up the scale. Down the scale. Sharps and flats. Major key. Minor key. But Sara was free now to go out and make her coffee. Free from that inquisitive eye and that polite little voice.

The rain had grown heavier, each drop striking against the windows with its own sharp little ping. But Sara didn't mind. She moved about the cottagey kitchen, fragrant with fresh-brewed coffee, her hands reaching familiarly for breakfast cups and plates. She liked the rain. It sealed her in. She paused a moment, listening to it. No wonder so many poets had written about the rain, that refresher from heaven. And musicians. She could remember a piece from her childhood—'The Dancing Raindrops'—Music! There was nothing but silence coming from the living-room. No, there was a sound—but not the sound of practising. An odd little whirr, then a thump. Sara started towards the living-room to investigate the noise.

Darts thrown at a dart-board! Brian, still seated at the piano, was engaging in an art at which he was already skilled. Sara watched for a moment, admiring his compact, well-co-ordinated body and the movement of the delicate, finely boned hands as they aimed and threw the darts with surprising

ease and rhythm. So much of Kay in the boy. So little of Mark. Only the hands and the eager turn of the head.

Sensing her presence in the room, Brian turned now and looked at her, displeased rather than discomfited.

'I say, Miss Scott, must you spy on me?'

'It seems that someone must,' Sara replied a little grimly. 'And your mother's in bed with a cold.'

As Sara spoke she collected the darts and the dart-board. 'You can redeem these when you've finished practising.'

Brian got to his feet and suddenly looked very tall as he looked up angrily at Sara. 'Put those back where you found them. Please.' The 'please' only served to harden the request.

'When you finish practising.'

Brian considered her for a long moment during which his anger and indignation grew. 'You have no right to take them,' he finally said. 'You have no right to do anything about me. You're not my mother.'

No! thought Sara. No! *I'm not your mother!* And then her thoughts were echoed in words. 'No, I'm not your mother. And, frankly, I don't care whether you practise or not. But your lessons cost money—and it's cheating your mother when you don't practise.'

The use of the word 'cheating' had struck home and Brian didn't reply for a moment, but he gave no ground. Good! thought Sara. He could stand up to her! She liked that. This was the first open clash between them and she had the uneasy feeling that he could out-stare her, if she'd let him. There was both dignity and thoughtfulness in the child as he stood before her and Sara came nearer to liking him than she had at any moment since she had come. For the first time she thought—perhaps his antagonism was partly her own fault. That first evening—she had let him sense her unreasoning resentment. If she could begin again—and then he spoke. A considered speech.

'I'll finish—if you'll put those things on the piano. I shan't touch them.'

His controlled anger was oddly like Mark's and Sara put

the darts and the dart-board where he had directed. She knew he wouldn't touch them. He had Mark's pride tempered by his mother's serenity, and she felt a surge of gratitude to Kay that Mark's son would be less vulnerable than his father. And as if in answer to the thought, Kay's voice came down, calling from the top of the stairs.

'Is there any coffee left, Sara?'

'Of course. Loads. Brian says you have a cold. I warned you yesterday——'

Sara had walked to the foot of the staircase as she spoke and now broke off as she caught sight of Kay, still in her dressing-gown, her face pale and drawn.

'You look dreadful! You can't have only a cold——'

'I didn't sleep. I'll be better after some coffee.'

Kay had started down as she spoke, but Sara put out a quick protesting hand. 'No, don't come down. I'll bring it up. It's a foul, wet day and you might just as well stop in bed.'

Kay hesitated. 'I think I shall—if you're quite sure it's no trouble.'

'Bacon?' asked Sara.

'No, thanks. Just coffee.' And with her hand to her forehead in an unaccustomed gesture, Kay turned back towards her own room.

As Sara laid a tray she remembered her first glimpse of the upstairs. The largest room in the front was a sitting-room; but it had obviously been what is called in America the master bedroom. It had a fireplace and bow windows jutting out over the front and catching all the southern sun. The room which Kay now had made her own was a tiny one with a narrow bed. A virginal bed. And Brian had the connecting room. Kay had never mentioned having slept in any room other than this, but Sara, with her natural prescience, had divined that, after Mark's death, Kay had moved out of their bedroom and converted it into an upstairs sitting-room. This move was the only visible evidence of an escape from her loss.

Carrying the tray upstairs, Sara caught a glimpse of this

room with its rosy chintz and deep, inviting chairs. Family photographs and books. The books which she had missed from Mark's study. But she had never crossed this threshold. Something had held her back. Was it delicacy, or fear? She didn't know.

Sara turned towards Kay's bedroom. Kay had gone back to bed and sat there, a letter in her hand. She had on a white cotton nightdress which, in an odd way, had no appearance of economy but rather the air of being worn by someone who preferred the texture of cotton and its clean soap and water aroma. Her milky breasts pulled against the thin material; not that they were over-large, but they had a look of vitality and constrained abundance. Sara thought, as she looked down at the sharp, delicate points which pushed out the front of her blouse—*after all, I'm only twenty-nine. Mine could be like that, if I had a child. But by whom? By whom?* And she felt her breasts shrink against her body under this chilling thought.

Kay put the letter down as Sara laid the tray across her knees and looked up, her eyes heavy with uncertainty and her smile strained.

'I *am* being pampered,' and then, after a moment's almost imperceptible hesitation, 'Are you having some coffee with me?'

'Yes,' said Sara. 'I put an extra cup on the tray.'

She held out her cup for Kay to fill and realized afresh how exhausted she seemed. 'I thought you were taking cold yesterday—you know how treacherous the weather can be this time of year—'

Kay smiled. A faint, controlled smile. 'You sound like a native—'

I must be more careful, Sara thought. My roots are going dangerously deep. But she answered easily, 'That's my newspaper woman's adaptability: at home everywhere—and nowhere.'

As she spoke, Kay leaned across the tray to pour the coffee into Sara's cup and the hot liquid set up a foggy screen between them.

'I'm afraid I made it a bit on the strong side,' Sara said.

Again Kay smiled, a faint smile as before. 'And you're being very *English*, too—did you know that?'

'Am I?' But she felt her face flush as she took the cup. 'But I still like American coffee. And so do you.'

'Yes. Yes, I do.' Kay drank some of the coffee in silence, looking at Sara thoughtfully over her cup.

'It seems strange, Sara, that of all the houses in St. Giles you should have come to this one.'

And then Sara saw the letter and her mouth was dry with the sickening sand of fear. Her heart hit against her ribs. Someone had written. Someone who *knew*. But she was spared answering by Kay's continuing speech. Her words came slowly, each spoken with care, as a child puts beads on a string. 'I've never asked you any questions, Sara.' She picked up the envelope and turned it over in her hand. 'But I must ask you one now. Do you mind?'

'No. Of course not.' And Sara waited for the question as a condemned man waits for the executioner's blow, his neck bared to the blade. She could feel the swish of the upraised axe. Then there was a pause; the question was held—the blade suspended in the trembling air.

'You see,' Kay went on, 'I can't help but know how much time you spend alone in that room downstairs. That's what really put the thought in my mind.' And then, quite abruptly—'How long do you intend to stop on here, Sara?'

'Does that mean you want me to go?'

Kay sat bolt upright in the bed, the coffee spilling over the side of her cup and running into the saucer.

'No—no! It means I want you to stay.'

Relief swept over Sara like nausea. She tried to form her mouth into an 'O' of pleased surprise, but her lips were stiff and unyielding. But Kay wasn't watching her now. Her eyes were on the letter she had picked up and her face was flushed, the fatigue partially ironed out, and her words came in a rush.

'You know, I think that's the really horrid thing of being left alone. One must ask favours. And I have no right

whatever to ask them of you. It's this letter. It came in yesterday's late post, from an old friend of mine—an old friend of ours.' She took the letter from its envelope as she spoke. 'It's about a job I could take on—'

Sara's hand was sufficiently steady now to put down her cup and take the letter from Kay's outstretched hand while Kay's eyes, bright and expectant and hopeful as a child's, watched her.

'Trefallin?' asked Sara, looking up from the letter. 'Is that far?'

'Oh, no. It's a largish town, only an hour or so on the bus. And I'd be home every evening and a half-day on Wednesday. And that's Brian's sports afternoon, so I'd be on hand to admire the strongest bat. You see, I'm not very experienced at anything—I married too young for that—but I might be able to take this job on, don't you think?'

Sara considered the letter. Her heart was slowing down—almost keeping time to the padded thumps of Brian's practice in the room below. Sara thought with some satisfaction—*he hasn't stopped! I made him heed me, respect me!* It was a small victory, but Sara savoured it.

'A bookshop. Do they do well in this part of the country?'

'Oh, yes. Everyone reads and, besides, books are not rationed. And down here in Cornwall we get winter visitors, but mostly in the larger places where they have the luxury hotel sort of thing. And there's a lending library as well.'

'Is it your friend who owns the shop?'

'Yes. When he was demobbed—'

'He?'

'Did you think it was a woman?'

'I don't know. I suppose I did.'

'He was badly shot up in the Battle of Britain—spent months and months in one of those hospitals where they re-make people's faces. But his eyes never got quite right, so he sold up his office—he was a solicitor—and bought this bookshop.'

Kay had never said so much so quickly in all the weeks Sara had known her. It was odd—under the reticence, the

swift flowing stream. Sara looked at Kay as if seeing her for the first time. Had she misjudged her? Were there other, stronger emotions veiled by those candid eyes, that tranquil brow? But she made her voice casual as she asked:

'Is he fond of you?'

'Oh, yes. We were terribly close, the three of us. I should say four, really, for Brian adores him.'

'That isn't quite what I meant.'

'Oh—well, really, I hadn't thought about it, Sara. But if he were fond in the way you mean, he wouldn't make a nuisance of it. Not at the shop.'

But Sara had to probe deeper. Foolishly deeper.

'Don't you ever think of marrying again?'

'Oh, no—never!' Then, as if embarrassed by the vehemence of her denial, 'I'm sorry. I don't mean to make a "thing" of being a widow. What a horrid word, Sara! But with Mark and me—well, there was never anyone else for each other. Never.'

Sara drew a tight little breath. *I deserved that*, she told herself. *I had no business asking. No business prying. I said 'Please—please—hand me the truth in a golden dish.' Only it wasn't the truth. Only one side of it. Only one side of the coin. And do you know what is on the other side? My name. Mine.* Sara. Sara Scott. November—1944. A golden month. A golden year."

She turned to Kay and said, a little coldly: 'I'm afraid I don't quite see what this proposed job has to do with

'How stupid of me! I should have explained straight off. It's Brian.'

And as Kay spoke his name, both women paused and listened to the silence from the room below.

'He's stopped practising,' said Kay with amused despair.

Sara glanced at her watch. 'He's finished,' And then, 'Do you think he has talent, Kay?'

'Not an atom, bless him!'

'Then why make him take lessons?'

'Because it keeps him sitting still for half an hour a day. He

does everything so *hard*—except practise. He's like his father in that. Mark raced through life. Sometimes I wonder if he knew——'

'Knew what?'

'That he had to hurry because he had so little time.'

Sara fled back to the subject of Brian for safety. 'What did you mean about me and Brian?'

'Oh, I've worried myself ill over it, Sara. You see, in another year or so he'll be off to boarding-school——'

'So young!' Sara exclaimed involuntarily.

'They all go before they're nine. A good prep school won't take them after that. And then I'll be alone, except for holidays. That's why I think this job may be important. I do hate dreary mothers who clutch on to only sons!'

Kay paused and Sara prompted her by an encouraging, 'Yes——'

'It's the thought of his coming home from school to an empty house. That's why I asked how long you'd be staying on.'

'So that I can mind Brian?'

'Not mind, exactly. Just *be* here. There'll be a matter of two hours or more between the close of school and my return home—if you were in the house——'

'Why *me* particularly, Kay?'

'Because he's accustomed to your being here. Don't you see, if I had someone come in specially, it could be upsetting. He's taking his rôle of "man of the house" rather seriously since we've been alone. I want him to feel that I think he can look after himself. But with you being here—he'd just accept it as part of an established pattern.'

Kay broke off, her look shy and her voice penitent. 'I know it's a great deal to ask—and you do so much unasked. But I don't want to disarrange Brian's life just now, for the job might not work out. I mean, I mightn't be very good at it. I'm not very clever, you know.'

Sara found herself deeply touched by Kay's utter simplicity, and her voice softened as she asked, 'And this is why you have put in a wretched, sleepless night?'

Kay nodded. 'I couldn't bring myself to ask you. And yet it seemed so perfect an arrangement.'

'Brian really doesn't like me very much, you know.'

'In an odd way, that will be a help. He won't think that you're watching over him. He'll feel free and trusted. That's terribly important to a little boy who's trying to grow up faster than he should. And it isn't that he doesn't like you, Sara—it's only a kind of shying away from the unfamiliar, the unknown. You mustn't forget, Brian has had a loss, too. He loved his father.'

And thus unconsciously rebuked, Sara felt a quick 'yes' rush to her lips, and was immediately grateful that Kay gave her no effusive thanks; but all the strain and anxiety went out of her face.

'It won't keep you tied too long. I should know in a month's time—'

And only then did Sara realize that she was being given a month, another whole month, in this house. Thirty days of blessed aloneness. Days in which to conjure up the past. The thought so shook her that she made an impulsive gesture of rejection, then checked herself abruptly as she saw Kay let herself relax against her pillows, at peace now that her problem was solved. How she loves her child, thought Sara. And had she given Mark that same tender, enveloping love? The only answer was the rain which beat with an urgent hand against the window.

'I should be getting up,' Kay murmured, but made no move to rise. 'It's going to be a sopping wet day. Hark at that rain!'

'Why don't you spend the day in bed? You could do with a bit of sleep.'

'And leave you to cope with Brian?'

Sara smiled. 'It will be practice for me.'

Kay hesitated. 'He *could* work on his stamp collection—that would keep him busy for hours—'

Sara rose quickly, the moment of weakness, the moment of refusal, past. 'Where do you keep it?'

'In the drawer under the window-seat in the living-room.'

Sara was half-way out of the room when Kay added, her voice already slow with drowsiness, 'I wonder why it seems so natural for you to be here?'

As Sara went down the stairs, the ping of the darts hitting against the dart-board helped to restore her calm.

Brian looked up as she came into the living-room.

'I've finished my practising. I watched the clock.'

'I'm sure you did,' Sara replied casually, hoping to cancel out their earlier clash. 'Look, Brian, your mother thinks it would be a good idea if you worked on your stamp collection. It'll be too wet for sports.'

Brian threw another dart expertly at the board before he ventured, in an off-hand manner, 'Did you tell my Mum what I said to you?'

'Did you think I would?'

'I wasn't sure.'

'I didn't.'

Brian kept his eyes firmly fixed on the dart-board as he replied, 'That was very sporting of you.'

'You may not like me, Brian—but I don't tell tales.'

Brian spoke slowly, deliberately, his sentences punctuated by shots at the dart-board. 'I don't *not* like you, Miss Scott. I don't *not* like anyone. It's just that some people belong to you and some people don't. And I'm used to only my Mum telling me to do things.' He dropped the darts still in his hand and turned towards the dining-room with enormous dignity. 'I'd like very much to work on my stamp collection. I mostly always do on rainy days. I should have thought of it quite by myself.'

Sara quickly knelt down by the window-seat to hide her smile as Brian retired to clear the dining-room table for work. How absurd that this child could move her to adult irritation! Only civilities seemed possible between them.

With a sigh she groped among the odd objects which usually fill the cavity of a window-seat until she found Brian's book of stamps, the transparent envelopes of unpasted specimens and all the kindred paraphernalia. Then, groping to make certain she had everything necessary, her hand came

in contact with a bulky leather album, thick with dust. As she opened the pages with her free hand, snapshots and photographs streaked across her vision. Mark, from little boyhood on! A whole lifetime captured and bound between dusty covers. All the hidden things she had sought for so thirstily delivered into her hands.

'I didn't ask for this! I didn't! I didn't!' she cried to herself. 'It came to me, like a gift on a birthday!'

CHAPTER XIV

SARA tidied the house, its labours having taken root as if they were an age-long habit. She knew where everything belonged and moved easily from task to task. She watered the garden and kept flowers in the familiar bowls. Once she had seen Kay off to her bus and Brian off to school, the long, quiet days were hers. And the house was hers. Its emptiness was as welcome as the cessation of sound, for she could fill it with the sights she wished to see and the sounds she wished to hear.

Her place in the household, in the village, had become fixed. She was, she felt certain, in the eyes of the neighbours, 'that nice American woman who's rented Kay Trevor's room. Quite a blessing it's turned out to be. Keeps to herself a good deal—not pushy. Paying guests can be so tiresome. But she seems to fit in, if you know what I mean. And it's given Kay a chance to try out that job. Odd, isn't it, how things work out. Chance, of course, sheer chance. But fortunate.'

Sara smiled to herself as she walked down the cobbled hill to the shops. She had the ration books in her purse and knew how to make the meagre allotment go as far as possible. Of course, the parcels from America helped.

She was quite at home in the village. The station and the Post Office and the newsagents, all were familiar to her. And she had learned to stop for 'clevenesses'—coffee and cakes at the baker's shop—after the endless queueing. Because she

was being a friend to Kay she had been accepted more quickly and readily—moreover, she was an American who had dropped into their life of austerity without complaint; and that made them feel at home with her. On her part, Sara regarded them with something very close to affection, for they were, unwittingly, helping her to live out the dream; to drift backward in time, into those shadowy tunnels of the past.

In the crowded steamy little baker's shop the women of St. Giles and a sprinkling of the men sat gratefully after the patient and often fruitless queuing, and pieced out their limited rations with coffee and cakes.

Sara sat at a table with one of the jolly Meade girls and conversation came easily.

'Yes, Brian's back at school again. Doing well, too—though I'm afraid that cricket is still his best subject.'

'His father loved games——'

'Yes,' said Sara. That was safe to say. Everyone knew the things Mark had loved. But not that he had loved her.

The Vicar's kind, vague wife stopped by their table. 'I do think it's outrageous! Only fish again to-day!'

'It hardly seems as if the war were over,' Sara replied. It was the expected response and she made it now without thinking.

And so, almost imperceptibly, Sara merged into their lives and they into hers. The small village jokes and gossip became familiar and they forgot that there had been a time when she had not lived among them.

With her shopping bag held firmly in her hands, Sara turned towards Tredegar Road. There were no holiday crowds now. The summer visitors, the 'trippers', had gone back to their inland homes to dream of the sea and store away its salty strength until another year. The village had settled down into its autumn pattern and Sara had become part of it. Walking back up the steep, cobbled hill she marked with satisfaction that she knew the inhabitants of every cottage, either by name or by sight; many to pass the time of day with. And a few had become friends.

That was old Mrs. Timpole at her window, busy with her

endless, exquisite needle-point. Her nephew was digging in the garden. He was the Church organist and had such a green hand that his flowers fairly flew into the air like notes of music.

Across the road was Mary Nevis with her bright yellow hair and her dumpling of a baby. She had a giddy, feckless look but she managed a house and a crippled husband and an old father, with a baby to boot, and not a whimper out of her. Sara wondered, with a wry smile, what Mary would make of the famous column, SARA SCOTT SAYS!

And here was Doctor Meade coming out of Sea View Cottage, his bag of medicines in his hand and healing in his very face and voice.

And Jeremy Lewes leaning on his garden gate, so lean, so bent, that he seemed a sickle of a man. Yet he was a brilliant scientist and geologist and did field work so arduous as to shame a hardier man. It's the spirit does it, Sara thought, as she waved a hand in greeting. And this backwater of a world had reserves of spirit as deep as the sea which beat against it.

She paused at the gate of Woodbine Cottage, first to regain her breath after the climb, for she had not yet completely recovered the health of which she had been so proud; and second, to savour the strange delight which surged over her each time she put her hand on the latch. That she should be living here was a never-ceasing source of wonder. Looking back, retracing each step, she seemed powerless to have prevented it.

Sara walked up the path between the rows of flowers, already touched by autumn, to the front door. She had a key now. A key to Mark's house. As she took it from her purse she thought of that first time in London, the flat in South Street, when she had stood trembling before her own door, and Mark had taken the key from her unresisting hand, and how she had closed his fingers over it, lost to him from that day forward.

Once inside, a curious change came over her. The calm order of her movements changed; became quickened, less organized. She stepped about impatiently, thrusting the

supplies she had bought into their proper places. Each day when she returned from the morning's errands she tried to hold down this rising tide of excitement, and each day she abandoned it as hopeless. For these were the hours for which she lived.

When she had closed the front door behind her, when she heard that click of the latch that meant she was shut off from the world, then the house became hers, swept clean as a hearth—ready for the dream. No one stopped by at this time of day. She was safe. Safe to fling her coat and beret on a chair, to kneel down by the window-seat and, by reaching into its dusty recesses, draw out the past!

She crouched on the floor, her body bent in a sheltering curve over the old photograph album which had fallen into her hands like manna from heaven. Stuff to feed on. And she went through the book as one performs a ritual. First, the swift flipping of the pages from beginning to end so that the snapshots and photographs whipped by her eyes like hounds. Then, back to the first page and the slow, voluptuous pleasure of a picture at a time, a dream at a time. Soaking herself in a past which was not hers, but with all the hungry tentacles of her mind reaching out to seize and *make* it hers. Sucked deeper and deeper into the anodyne of unreality. Fathoms deep. Fathoms deep.

And from that swirling, devouring funnel she heard her own voice come bubbling up as if through water.

I know what it is to be a secret drinker. I lock myself up and open this book the way a drunkard opens a bottle. I turn one page and then another and another. And then the magic begins to work. That beautiful escape, that blessed sense of unreality, more real than any reality. That merging of the past and the present and the future into a shining, clinging web that binds me fast. Until I lose my identity, lose my sense of time—lose my sense of loss.

Slowly, slowly—page after page—she saw Mark grow and change and mature. The small boy in shorts became the schoolboy in flannels. The earnest young cricketer was the laughing boy on the pony. The dignified Cambridge undergraduate the dashing rugger player. Riding parties—

Christmas parties. Birthday cakes—boating on the river—sitting on the stairs at dances. And always the same girl. No mistaking that candid brow, the wide, sweet eyes, the look of health and love and serenity. But Sara blotted out that face in her mind and, as one murmurs an incantation, said over and over to herself, *I am that child—I am that girl you grew up with—I am that woman you married!*

Now the thoughts began to mount as notes in a scale of music. *It was my first birthday party, and you helped blow out the candles. It was my first Christmas party and you helped trim the tree. My first dance—my first long frock—my first kiss!*

She clasped her arms tightly about her, hugging the illusion, making it a twin to herself.

It's complete now, Mark. I can put it all together. All those years I missed. I can see your whole life as it rolls backward. It belongs to me, now. I can dream it through. Make it mine. All of it!

And with her eyes closed to the truth as if it were a prowling tiger seeking to devour the dream, Sara saw herself standing in a cloud of tulle, her arms heavy with sweet-scented flowers, her hand outstretched for the ring which meant for ever, and Mark beside her in the broken, prismatic glow of stained-glass—and voices rained upon them like arrows: 'Good wishes—good wishes—good wishes. A long life and happiness! Together—together—together!'

Then the church bells rang, their clangour drowning out any other sound, and they rang through her body until it reverberated and trembled with excitement and delight and Sara felt as if she herself were a bell cast in bronze with the clapper beating against her, ringing out a message of hope and happiness and consummation.

The book fell from her hands and she sat motionless, letting the sound encircle her. This was always the end of the dream, and she waited for the bells to die away in eddying rings of sound and to be left alone and in silence. But to-day the sound persisted, its multiple clangour giving way to the long, penetrating ring of a single bell. It was the front door.

Sara, her hands numb with apprehension, gathered up the photograph album and dropped it back into the window-seat. Still the bell rang. Sara stumbled to her feet, alarmed and bemused. Even to focus her eyes was an effort. The bell! The bell! Hurrying now, she reached the door and opened it—then stood shaking her head incredulously as if this, too, were a dream. And as she stood on the threshold, Carter Reynolds walked past her into the room.

CHAPTER XV

ALL night, flying over the black waters of the Atlantic, Reynolds had been trying to picture Sara, trying to picture what these weeks in St. Giles might have done to her. And now that he faced her standing in the doorway with the salty, flower-laden air swirling about them, he was struck, so violently that it might have been a physical blow, by the astonishing youth of her appearance.

That she would be thin after an illness, he had expected. But it was not that sort of thinness. It was as if her very bones had grown young and fragile and were still reaching out for their ultimate strength. Her face was fined down to a touching delicacy. The brilliant hazel eyes under the darkened brows had little hollows around them, and there were hollows in her cheeks and at the pit of her throat. But they seemed the hollows of promise, of beauty and growth to come.

Even the hand which pushed the hair back from her forehead looked young and unformed. And when she moved, it was with the fluid, sweet awkwardness of youth, which was in its way a startled grace. She had the look of one of the little Degas ballet girls she loved—the tremulous hope, the reaching out of slender arms, the vulnerable sweetness. In her simple skirt and jersey she might have been the Sara Scott who had walked into his office ten years before. It was as if she had, in some magical way, turned back the clock.

Why, Reynolds thought to himself, this place has done her good! She had known what was right for her all along. Found her own therapy, as the analysts would call it. And worry drained away from him and fear relaxed its tight land.

And all the while his voice ran on, saying: 'How did I get here? Flew, of course. Then a train down here. Tried to get a car but no petrol on such short notice. It would have meant waiting a day. No. Jake didn't tell me you were here. Jake's a good boy. Sara, my dear, my dear—can't you guess how I knew where you were? The food parcels. I remembered about them. It was that simple. Yes, indeed, they told me, they were taking good care of Miss Scott, Every week a parcel went to Woodbine Cottage, Tredegar Road, St. Giles, Cornwall, England. I would have telephoned you from London, but I didn't know under what name to look.'

Sara exhaled her breath slowly; the breath which she had been holding in her dry, astonished mouth. He didn't know that this was Mark's house! He didn't know!

She tried to steady herself, to pull herself up from that dizzying, swirling funnel and be spewed out; to disentangle her mind and body, her eyes and limbs, from the clinging, imprisoning web of the past; to shake off the magic; to let the bells cease their ringing and the echoes die away.

And as she made mechanical replies, her eyes flew about the room, coming to rest on Mark's photograph in its place on the piano; and he became at once the third person in the room. She must keep Reynolds outside. Not the three of them together again. She couldn't bear that.

'Oh, no, not a boarding-house. They just take an occasional paying guest.' Her face was damp and she pushed her hair back from her forehead in the gesture which Reynolds suddenly found so endearing. 'It's close in here—and warm, don't you think? Why don't we go outside into the garden—'

Sara turned and moved past Reynolds so quickly, so lightly, that he scarcely felt her pass. And a faint uneasiness stirred in him, scarcely more perceptible than the breeze. But it

chilled him; for, in that instant, Sara had become unreal and intangible.

The tiny garden at the side of the house was still gay with late flowers, and Sara led the way to some shabby garden chairs under a pergola. Patches of sunlight came through the leafy vines and climbing roses which covered it. At the far end of the garden was a latticed summer-house. A nice place to work, Reynolds thought. And then, *I wonder if Sara's done any writing here.* But he was wary of questions. At the beginning, anyway. As she sank into the chair beside him he glanced at her half-averted face, uncertain how to begin. He took out his cigarette case and opened it and held it out to her. She turned her face full towards him to take one and he saw that the natural olive of her skin was gently browned by the wind and the sea. As was the hand which reached for and took a cigarette. There were matches on the rustic table and Reynolds watched to see if Sara would take one and strike it against her thumb-nail, as Mark had taught her to do. But she waited quietly for him to hold out his lighter.

'It's good to see you looking so well, Sara.'

'But I *am* well.'

'You weren't when I left.'

Sara smiled vaguely. 'Oh, no. So I wasn't.' And there was a silence while the smoke from her cigarette curled up unnoticed, making a faint haze between them. Reynolds searched for another opening gambit. He looked about him, then out past the fence to the cobbled road, and listened to the sound of the sea.

'St. Giles. I suppose Mark Trevor's house is around here somewhere?' He paused and Sara nodded slightly. 'A house like this? Picket fence—roses, or woodbine, over the front door? That's the way I guessed it that night at the airport. Remember?'

'It's so long ago,' Sara murmured.

'Five months? Not so long.'

'Only that?' And there was wonder in her voice.

'Well, I suppose it does seem longer than that, living here

in a quiet village,' Reynolds replied matter-of-factly. 'I think you were right to come here, Sara. See it for yourself. Put it in its proper perspective.'

Sara didn't reply nor turn her face towards him.

'I mean, find out that you don't belong here. That you never could.'

Sara slowly looked at him, her eyes opaque.

'But I could belong here.' And then, in a slower, softer voice: 'I *do* belong here.'

The uneasiness which had touched Reynolds began to spread like mist and he thought—she looks like a sleep-walker! But he made his voice easy and kept the tremor of fear out of it.

'Look, Sara, everything I ever said about Mark still holds. He was a nice guy. A brave, decent, sensitive guy. He might have gone a long way. And he might not. He grew up in that time with you. You did that for him, Sara. He went ahead, a little too quickly, too painfully. And you went back.' Sara made a move as if to speak but Reynolds silenced her impatiently. 'No, hear me out. I came a good distance to speak my piece. You owe me that.'

'Oh, if you're going to start reminding me of what I *owe* you—'

'I'm not. I haven't time. And if you've convinced yourself that you belong here, Sara, it's time to wake up. This town—this place where Mark lived—staying here isn't the way to get over him. I suppose you hang on hoping to catch a glimpse of his wife. Maybe you've met her. *Have* you, Sara?'

But instead of replying, Sara got abruptly to her feet. 'We can't visit very well here, Carter. Why don't I meet you at the inn for dinner? You're staying there, aren't you? That will be better.'

Reynolds remained seated as he replied. 'No. I want to take all this in. Try to understand under what strange compulsion you are acting.'

'But, we can't talk properly here.'

'Why not?'

“Well, people drop by. You know how life is in a village—”

“I don’t. That’s what I’ve come to find out.”

And then he saw that Sara was looking past him to the steep, cobbled hill down which a woman was walking. A stout, thick-set woman, carrying a basket. She moved steadily, unswervingly, towards the gate and Sara’s hands fell helplessly to her sides.

Oh, God, thought Sara—if I can only keep her from talking! There, she’s opened the gate now. She’ll see I have someone with me. Perhaps she’ll just put the basket down and leave. No, she’s coming around the garden to speak to me. Perhaps she won’t say too much. Perhaps—perhaps . . . Her thoughts trailed away as Mrs. Penryn paused in front of her, balancing the heavy basket easily on her hip. Reynolds got to his feet.

“Begging your pardon, Miss Scott—”

“Yes—what is it, Mr. Penryn?”

“My husband’s beginning his holidays next week, so I won’t be picking up the wash for a fortnight. Would you be good enough to tell Mrs.——”

“I’ll tell her,” Sara cut in quickly, before Mrs. Penryn could speak the name.

“And would you also tell her that the boy’s cotton singlets are too far gone to mend? The lad is certainly growing fast.” And then with a sigh, “It would have pleased his father.”

“Yes. I’m sure it would. And I’ll tell her, Mrs. Penryn. I hope you and your husband have a good holiday.”

“Thank you. We’re going into Dorset. Quite a change it will be.” She paused between Sara and Reynolds, going towards the back door. “I’ll put the wash in the kitchen.”

Then, when she was safely out of sight, her pleasant country voice floated back.

“Oh, I found some buttons for Mrs. Trevor’s blouse. They don’t quite match the old ones, but they’ll do.”

Sara dared not look at Reynolds. She felt as if her eyes were frozen in their sockets. And the words fell from her mouth like stones.

'Thank you, Mrs. Penryn. I'm sure she'll be pleased.'

And then Reynolds's voice came to her, harsh and rough with shock.

'This is Mark Trevor's place! Sara, you are living *in* *his* house!'

Sara flung out her hands in a gesture of such passion and despair that Reynolds closed his eyes for a moment against the sight.

'I didn't *mean* to!' She fairly cried the words. 'It all just happened. I didn't *mean* to stay! I came down to St. Giles for only one day. To carry away a picture—a memory. To see the streets he used to walk and the house which sheltered him. I never meant to *live* in it!'

'Then why are you?'

'Please, Carter! It just *happened*. The inn was full up. I couldn't book a room even for the night. So I left my bag there and started up the hill, just to walk by his house.'

'All right. So you walked by, crazy as it was. But why didn't you keep on walking?'

'I did! I did! Right to the very top of the hill. I knew then I shouldn't have come. But there was no other way down and I had to pass the house again. I tried to make my feet hurry but they seemed to cling to the road. And then she saw me and ran out of the house and spoke to me.'

'She *knew* who you were!'

'No! No! She'd seen me walk up the hill and stop—and then come back again and she was sure I had come about the room. Don't you see, she'd put a notice up in the Post Office about a room for the summer——'

'How could you ever have taken it, Sara?'

'I keep telling you, I didn't *mean* to! I never meant to set foot inside the house. But when Kay—when she came out into the road—I nearly fainted, Carter. And I didn't dare say I hadn't come about the room. She started to lead the way inside—and I followed. I thought, 'I'll look—just once. See it all—just once. A first and a last time.'

As Sara spoke, Reynolds watched the pupils of her eyes dilate and listened to the words spilling over each other as they

had so often in the telling of an exciting news story. She was being factual. That he knew. However muddled her thinking might be now, her facts were straight. It had all happened exactly as she said. She was too good a writer to have concocted so unbelievable a story.

'And the room—it was Mark's study, Carter! His very own special place where he wrote and worked. But even then I didn't mean to stay. I told her I was only spending the night in St. Giles and that's all I ever meant to stay. But I couldn't leave. It was as if Mark were reaching out and holding me. As if he had drawn me here against my will and would never let me go.'

The sentences had come faster and faster and when Sara stopped for breath her upper lip was beaded with sweat. And in the silence Reynolds could hear birds singing in the gardens and the deep surge of the sea. He tried to speak calmly to himself. This is dangerous. This is a hovering on that border-line they all talk about. How do I reach out a hand to hold her back? She's like a sleep-walker that I'm afraid to touch. What can I do? What is the *safe* thing to do? The safe thing to *say*? Ask about Mark's wife? . . . Maybe that will get us back to normal. I've got to risk something.

'What about his wife, Sara? What is she like?'

Sara smiled and the tension seemed to go out of her. 'Oh, nice. Very nice. Very attractive. You'd like her.'

Reynolds stared at her. This was not what he had expected. What had become of that tormenting jealousy which had driven her to opening Mark's letter to his wife? He could still hear Sara's shocked voice: 'Think what I've done! Isn't it shameful? That I could so degrade myself. But I had to know—I had to know. Oh, Carter—he calls her "my darling Kay"!' .

He strove again for the right words to say.

'Then think what you're doing to her, Sara. Think what you're *taking* from her.'

'Nothing she hadn't lost already. I haven't done any harm. More than that—I've been a help. There's a job

she's taken and she couldn't have taken it without me, for there must be someone to look after Brian, her little boy, when he comes home from school. And she *needs* the job. She *needs* the money.' Her voice took on a new persistence, a gentle stubbornness. 'She likes me. She likes having me here. She said it had been good for her not to be alone.'

'Good?' Reynolds echoed. 'Nothing *good* can come of a relationship as—as cock-eyed as this! If she's a nice woman, Sara—and if you say so, she must be—think of what will happen when she finds who you are.'

'Why should she find out?'

'She's bound to, Sara.'

'How?'

'I don't know *how*. I only know it isn't in the cards for a thing like this to remain concealed. It's dynamite—and you know it!'

Sara shook her head with that same soft insistence, and he felt her slipping away again from reality.

'There's something I haven't told you, Carter. I haven't told you, when Kay led the way into the house, why I was able to follow her. And why I was able to stay.' She paused and looked at Reynolds with a confused wonder in her eyes. 'There was no grief in her face. There is no grief in this house.'

There was the sharp bang of the gate and the sound of feet pelting down the brick path.

'Mum! I say, Mum!'

A moment later Reynolds saw a small boy in shorts and a jersey, with a rumpled head of fair hair, stop abruptly at the sight of Sara.

'Oh, it's you, Miss Scott.'

'You know your mother isn't home this early, Brian. But she said if you went out for cricket practice, to be sure to wear your woollen pullover.'

'I don't need a silly pullover. None of the other chaps are wearing them—'

'None of the "other chaps" have had colds.'

And Reynolds marvelled at the quiet irony of Sara's voice and looked at Brian with the warm interest of a man who likes children.

Aren't you going to introduce me?' Reynolds said to Sara

Brian, this is a friend of mine from America.'

Reynolds held out his hand. 'My name is Reynolds.'

'How do you do, sir. Mine is Trevor.'

As Reynolds took the boy's hand, his natural interest quickened into something more. He liked him. Liked the way he had put out his hand. Liked the feel of it in his. A warm surge of friendliness came over him.

'Are you a cricketer?'

'Rather!' Then, with quick modesty, 'I mean, I have a jolly good try at it.' He turned back to Sara firmly.

'And, really, Miss Scott—'

'Your pullover is on the sofa in the living-room.'

For a moment they faced each other and Reynolds, under all his acute anxiety, was amused at the silent contest.

'Well, if you're certain my Mum said to wear it . . .' and he darted into the house.

From the road outside came shouts of 'Hurry up there, young Trevor. We'll be late.' Then the front door banged and there was silence.

'You're not trying to pretend that child is yours, too, are you, Sara?'

'Pretend he's mine? He doesn't even like me!'

'Kids are smart people. He knows you don't belong here.'

As he spoke, Reynolds turned towards the house so quickly that his last words were said over his shoulder. 'Where's your room?'

'Why?' Sara called after him.

Reynolds stopped and faced her. 'Because you're going to pack and get out of here. Now.'

At the open glass doors leading to Mark's room, Sara barred the way. 'I'm not going. I'm not leaving.'

Reynolds's reply was to brush past her into the room. 'It shouldn't take long. You've only hand luggage. Your trunks are in New York.'

Sara followed him into the room and as she stood there surrounded by Mark's possessions, Reynolds saw her mood change; saw that odd sleep-walker's look come over her face. She moved slowly as if her limbs were weighted. She walked past Reynolds as if he were not there. She walked about the room as if she were in a dream. Gently and lovingly, her hands touched the desk, the bookshelves, and came to rest on the back of the worn armchair.

'His presence is everywhere. I sit here in his chair. I read his books. I write at his desk. I recreate his life; recreate the past, little by little—stone by stone—until I know it as I know my own life. Dream it back until I am part of it. And it is part of me.'

And Reynolds suddenly knew what had put that look of imperishable youth into her face. She had, in truth, turned back the years. And he remembered stories of the insane: how, when the mind was suspended, the body ceased to age. He felt himself grow cold with dread and helplessness. *I was right that first moment, he thought. She has moved backward in time. She's letting her life run downhill into an abyss of nothingness.* And again he searched for the right words. For quiet words.

'And what do you gain by all this, Sara?'

'I had so little. Only those crazy, crowded months!'

'You had no right to that little.'

'What do you mean—no right? We loved each other. Doesn't love give you any rights?'

'Not in any book of statutes I ever read.' And his voice was grim. But he tried to make it gentle as he went on: 'You're still fooling yourself, Sara—kidding yourself. Half of you, the smart half, wanted to get out of here. But the other half wanted to stay. And once you could honestly say to yourself—"I can't help being here. I didn't plan it. I didn't mean it to happen"—then that other half took over. Started to relive Mark's life here. Pretend you'd shared it

with him. I don't know, Sara. I could be wrong. But I do know one thing. Nothing here is yours. Nothing.'

Sara hadn't moved a visible fraction. She still stood behind the armchair, her hands resting against its back. And she didn't move when she replied.

'I can *make* it mine.'

And looking at her, Reynolds began to believe she could.

Kay's unexpected voice broke the silence. It came through the house like a breath of cleansing air.

'I'm home early, Sara. Where are you?'

'Here. In my room.'

Kay's footsteps were quick and sure and her voice travelled ahead of her

'I met Mrs. Penryn down the road. She would go on holiday just when Brian is down to one of everything—Oh—' she broke off as she saw Reynolds—'I'm sorry—I didn't know—'

Reynolds watched Sara turn towards the door with an easy, friendly smile. 'It's quite all right. It's Carter Reynolds. He owns the paper I work for. Carter, this is Kay Trevor.'

Reynolds, usually so self-possessed, had some difficulty in keeping the surprise and admiration out of his face, as Kay turned to him. He had expected, from Sara's words, a moderately attractive woman, but not one so lovely as this. There was something so sound, so sweet about her, like fresh, ripe fruit filled with goodness. She faced him as he was certain she faced the world, with warmth and serenity. And he knew as clearly as if it had been written in ink for him to read, why Sara had seen no ravaging grief. For Kay had the look of a woman who had been secure in her husband's love. His loss had brought sorrow, but not torment.

'How do you do, Mr. Reynolds. I hope you haven't come to take Sara away—'

Reynolds smiled. 'Are you usually so perceptive? She has got a job of work to do.'

'She's been doing a job of work here—at least, helping me do one. I can't tell you how I've enjoyed having her here.'

And she means it, Reynolds thought. He looked from Kay to Sara, whose face was now relaxed and friendly. These two women *like* each other. Genuinely like each other. And all the while, the truth bubbling between them like a volcano, ready to belch into fire! He realized that Kay was speaking to him.

'I hope you're expecting to stay on awhile, here in St. Giles?'

'Until I can take Sara back with me.'

Sara looked at him coldly, then turned to Kay. 'I'm going down to The Cornwall Arms, Kay. We're going to have dinner there.'

'Oh, Sara, you know it will be quite dreadful! Don't let her inflict it on you, Mr. Reynolds. Food is so difficult just now—won't you stay on and take pot-luck with us?'

'I'd like that very much,' Reynolds said before Sara could speak.

'It's warm—probably the last of the warm evenings. We might eat in the garden. There's a sort of summer-house—'

'I'd like that even better.'

'Then, if you'll excuse me, I'll see what there is in the larder.'

When she had gone, Reynolds said softly, 'You were right, Sara. She is nice. Very nice. Very attractive.'*

Sara brushed his words aside. 'Don't stay here for dinner! Make some excuse. I don't want you here! I don't want you messing up my life!'

'I'll admit it's tough competition after what you've done—but I'll take a whack at it!'

Then, without warning, he took Sara by the shoulders roughly and almost shook her. 'The poor guy's dead, Sara! Stop digging him up, ~~and~~ trying to bury yourself with him! For God's sake, let him go!'

CHAPTER XVI

THROUGH the latticed sides of the summer-house while she laid the table, Sara could see Reynolds and Brian putting the last touches to the little open-air fireplace he had improvised with Brian's eager and enthusiastic help. Reynolds had taken off his coat and rolled up his sleeves and it was hard to tell whose face was more flushed and shining, his or the boy's. Reynolds was clever with his hands and they moved deftly and surely, arranging the flat stones Brian had gathered together, building up the sides as a shelter from the wind, then laying a fire, stick by careful stick. Sara remembered the old saying—'If you can't build a good fire you can't make a good wife,' and wondered if she had ever built a good fire. But, I could, her swift mind answered: I could!

Brian's oddly animated voice ran on like a busy little brook. Sara had never known him so gay and talkative. This is how he must have been with his father. And she could see Mark in a new light. It troubled the picture for her. She tried not to listen, not to take it in, but the little boy's voice was edged with pleasure and excitement.

As Kay passed back and forth from kitchen to garden, her thoughts, had the pattern been visible, were interlaced with Sara's. She found the sight of the two heads bent over the placing of the stones and the building of the fire oddly satisfying. It brought back a picture of Mark which was, at first, both sad and disturbing. But this emotion was quickly lost in Brian's delight. He was almost touchingly happy in a man's society. He had, of course, constant contact with other men in the village, but this was a man in his own house being busy and companionable. Doing the things with him his own father had done.

But as she took jars of jam and relish out to the summer-house,

Kay was puzzled by Sara's mood; so silent, so withdrawn. Almost resentful. A lover's quarrel, perhaps. For Kay, with the delicate perception of a thoroughly uncomplicated person, knew at once that Reynolds was in love with Sara. But who, then, was the man Sara had lost—the man she had loved and who had died? She paused in her return journey to the house to look at Reynolds for a moment, while he was unconscious of her gaze. And she liked what she saw. The close-cropped sandy hair, the fine skin, the startlingly blue eyes, the powdering of freckles which took away that career man look. He was almost the first American she had ever met and she found his obvious education and polish made all the more attractive by his easy, deliberate colloquialisms. In the matter of a few hours he seemed a familiar presence. And again the thought puzzled her: why wasn't Sara in love with him? He seemed so suitable; so desirable.

Kay stood for a moment longer looking, and listening to Brian's happy voice for the sheer pleasure the sound gave her. Something in the child which had been choked off, stifled, was being released under Reynolds's kind, careful voice and his disarming smile. Although, as she walked slowly back into the house, she realized there was more to the man than that. And then, quite irrelevantly—how Mark would have liked him. Her thoughts were very close to Mark to-night. He seemed oddly—painfully, near. Then she heard Brian laugh outright at something Reynolds had said and with its echo in her heart she went back into the house.

And Reynolds, in the dusky evening with the familiarity of burning wood puffing up into the salty air, was acutely aware of the two women, so different in type and quality, and yet their lives so intimately linked. And his mind, too, dwelt on Mark. Better for Sara that he was dead. Better for Mark, too. His thoughts ran on. Strange how a man's performance of his simple, patriotic duty could take a contented life, as he was sure Mark's had been with Kay, and change it into a confused and tormented one. He could see Mark's dark, vivid face with the faint lines of strain, the air

of forced maturity which comes with the quick, hot-house growth of passion; the look of a monk whose vows have become chains.

That restaurant in London—the Fleur de Lys—was suddenly clear in his mind. The impact of seeing Mark and Sara together for the first, the only time. The mirrored walls, the music, the popping of champagne corks, the pretty women and the uniformed men; and over it all, the sense of doom that hung in the air like smoke. He remembered it all and wondered now, as he had wondered then, what the next hour would bring.

The little fire which Reynolds had been so carefully nursing suddenly leapt into flame between him and the boy.

‘I say, sir—this is smashing! I’ll know how to make a fire better than any of the other chaps when I join the Boy Scouts—’

‘That’s where I learned.’

‘With the Boy Scouts? Do they have them in America, sir?’

‘Oh, we’ve borrowed a lot of good things from you English.’

‘Some people here seem to think we do all the borrowing. That’s what Mr. Penworth says.’

‘Oh, well, give or take—it’s all in the family.’ Reynolds straightened up from bending over the fire. ‘Do you think you could manage a fire like this by yourself, now?’

Brian considered this question, observing the fire from every angle. Reynolds watched him, amused, and thought—his father was more impetuous.

‘Yes, sir, I think I could. Do we put the—the dogs on now, sir?’

‘What do you call these in England, Brian?’

‘Bangers. Only I’ve never had them like this, cooked over an open fire.’

Reynolds speared a Frankfurter from the large tin they had been shipped in and handed it to Brian. ‘Here, you take this fork—it has the longer handle—and I’ll take the other. And keep turning—’

'Like this?'

'Precisely. You learn quickly.'

'Thank you, sir.' And, then with that passion for accuracy: 'I don't seem to learn very quickly in Latin. Did you, sir?'

'Well, I didn't start until I was a good bit older than you. We don't in America, you know. Just how old are you, Brian?'

'Nearly eight.'

'You're pretty tall for eight.'

'My dad was pretty tall, too. He was a wizard rugger player, a super back. He hurt his knee playing rugger—that's why he couldn't be a soldier. But he was killed in the war, just the same.'

'It isn't always the uniform that makes a soldier. If he was killed doing a job of work in the war—then he was a soldier.'

Brian turned up to Reynolds a face flooded with response.

'That's what my Mum says. She says he was braver than a soldier because he needn't have gone. And he couldn't fight back.'

'Your mother was right. Absolutely, dead right.'

'I say, sir, do you mean that? You see, women like to tell one things to make one feel better, don't you think? But if you say so—you seem a proper sportsman—you wouldn't butter me up, would you?'

Reynolds looked down at the flushed, eager face and thought: this is better than a nice kid. This is a fine boy. A boy to be proud of. And he answered firmly.

'As one sportsman to another—the answer is NO!'

Reynolds held out his hand as he finished speaking and Brian put his own into it and they exchanged a solemn, man-to-man shake. Then Brian remembered the fork in his other hand.

'I'm afraid I've let this one get scorched a bit——'

'Scorched! It's burnt to a crisp!' He held out the open tin. 'Here, better make a fresh start.'

'Do you think I might eat the burnt one? It smells most awfully good.'

Just then Kay came out from the house carrying an old oil lantern, a ship's lantern, for them to eat by. Brian called to her and she stood beside them in a pool of yellow light.

'What was it Daddy used to say, Mum? Something about sausages smelling sweet—'

Kay found herself moved by Brian's sudden memories of his father. She looked at Reynolds with an uncertain smile. 'It was just one of those foolish, family jokes. I didn't know you remembered, Brian.'

Sara, mixing a salad in the summer-house, the pungent fumes of vinegar rising from the bowl, listened to Kay's sweet, clear voice as she quoted Mark's words:

'That which we call a sausage, by any other name would —'

'Smell as sweet!' cried out Brian, triumphantly finishing it for her. 'That's it!' And he chanted it over again. 'That which we call a sausage, by any other name would smell as sweet.' Then, turning to Reynolds, 'That's a sort of famous quotation, isn't it, sir?'

And Sara stood watching through the lattice. How cosy they look standing there, the three of them! As if they belonged together. Mark and I—we are the outsiders. The odd ones out who found each other. And lost each other. She bent her head over the salad bowl and felt the vinegar in her eyes and in her throat, acid and penetrating.

Reynolds caught in unguarded look in Kay's eyes and turned to Brian. 'It certainly is a famous quotation. And where, may I ask, is the mustard?'

'In the house. I'll get it.'

As Brian darted off, Reynolds spoke to Kay in the quiet, personal voice which had won, and held, so many friends.

'I'm afraid your little boy's talk of his father has been upsetting for you. I'm very sorry—'

'Oh, don't be! I've been so fearful lest he'd forgotten his father. He never speaks of him. Never seems to remember

all the things they used to do together. It has made me very sad—and troubled.'

'Perhaps this little picnic supper stirred up his memories—'

Kay smiled, her warm smile. 'Mark used to love picnics. And snacks at the most unexpected hours—and of the most unexpected foods. But it's more than that with 'Brian. You've been so kind and, well, friendly with him—made him feel masculine and important. He must have missed his father a great deal more than I realized. Been lonely in this woman's world.'

'There is such a thing as masculine solidarity,' Reynolds agreed. 'And I don't think a little remembering will hurt him. If it doesn't hurt *you*.'

'Oh, that isn't important,' said Kay, brushing aside the possible hurt to herself as if it were a cobweb. 'I'm glad it has all come alive. Glad he remembers how much he loved his father. And how much his father loved him.'

And then, quietly, reflectively, almost as if speaking to herself, 'A woman, if she tries very hard, can put her life together without her husband. But a little boy does need his father.'

And the lantern wavered in her hand as if responding to the slight tremor in her voice. Then Brian came dashing out of the house with the mustard, and Kay turned towards the summer-house, and Sara.

'Sara, my dear! I've left you in the dark!' She walked swiftly across the garden, the circle of golden light moving with her.

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After dinner they had moved inside to the pleasant, low-ceilinged living-room where a coffee table was set in the bow-window.

A moment of quiet had descended and Sara continued to wonder what Reynolds's attack, what his plan, would be. For that he would have a plan, she had no doubt. But during the meal in the summer-house he had betrayed in no

way the strain under which she knew he was labouring; nor the anxiety and the anger she knew he felt. He had been at his best, his most engaging. Never had his charm and urbanity served him better. Brian, completely captivated, had darted back and forth, putting more Frankfurters on the fire, growing expert in the process and beaming with pleasure and pride; while Kay was a quieter reflection of the little boy's happiness. But even her accustomed tranquillity was stirred, as quiet waters are stirred. Sara had never seen her so responsive, so unreservedly relaxed and happy. She had a nice mind, and Sara was grateful that they kept the conversation running smoothly between them. She had always thought of Kay as an unworldly woman, in the sense of living in a small village, in a backwater of life, and was a little surprised at the ease with which she exchanged views and ideas with Reynolds. Her manner was open and friendly, completely unflirtatious and yet full of an indefinable charm. Womanly, that was the word. Womanly charm. Unaffected, unself-conscious. And, under all the talk, Sara had waited for the key word, the key sentence, she knew would come. She had compelled herself to listen and to wait. As she waited now in this quiet room.

Sara turned her head quickly as she heard the rasp of Reynolds's chair against the polished floor as he pushed it back, and rose to his feet. He walked over to the piano where he stood looking at Mark's photograph; looking long and deliberately. Then he spoke to Kay.

'Do you know, Mrs. Trevor—I think I met your husband once. In London.'

So—that's it, thought Sara. He's going to talk about Mark. Make him come alive in this room! Then, in a quick defensive gesture of her mind—I won't let him make me part of it!

She determined to divorce her emotions from the situation. To see it all objectively. Carter Reynolds, the big newspaper man, handling a tough assignment. She had watched him so often like this—she and Jake. Admired him. The easy manner, the delicate technique, the gentle encouragement, the apparently irrelevant questions, the almost

imperceptible guiding of the steps into the desired direction. The charmer! Well, she wouldn't be charmed. She'd leave that for Kay. She'd forget that it concerned her. She'd shut it out from that part of her consciousness. Make it all quite impersonal. Do what Jake loved to do: sit back and watch the Boss in action. He boxes with his brains, Jake used to say, and does fancy footwork with the words. She'd mask her face and feelings. Not give him any help. Not let him know when a blow struck home. She found herself thinking in Jake's idiom and clung to it for safety. It was familiar ground under her feet. Good, firm ground.

Kay's face had lighted up at Reynolds's words. She sat for a moment, the silver coffee pot gleaming in her hand, her lips parted in wonder and delight. Then she said softly, 'No! Not really! Are you sure?'

'Mark Trevor, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Then I'm sure.'

Kay put the coffee pot gently down on the tray, as if a harsh noise might break the magic of the moment.

In a moment she'll say how lonely she was! Sara thought. Well, I shan't listen. I don't want to know how she missed Mark. The months she spent here alone. I don't want to hear about her loneliness. I don't believe in it. She couldn't have stayed on here if she'd really missed him. I couldn't! I wouldn't! Not if I'd had to walk to London. Bare-foot. She was safely here in St. Giles, snug in her house and with her child for comfort. You can't exchange a man for a child. Not a man like Mark.

'You're the first person I've met who knew him during that time,' said Kay. 'There's so much I've been longing to know. Was he well? Did he seem—happy?'

'Happy?' Reynolds echoed. 'London wasn't a very happy place, just then.'

Ah, Kay, why don't you ask me if he was happy? I could tell you! The work we shared. The danger we shared. The love we shared!

'Kay's voice went on in a soft rush of words. 'There's so much I want to know, although he wrote me every day——'

In spite of herself, Sara stirred and Kay, mistaking it for a move to leave the room, put out a quick, restraining hand. No, Sara. We have no secrets.'

No secrets? Only the one. That Mark and I loved each other? Found joy and solace and excitement and delight in each other. Only that secret, Kay. And she made herself see Mark's face bending over hers, dark and demanding. From the very first day.

'In the beginning, he seemed to find everything so exciting, so stimulating. If the post was held up, as it was so often during the war, I felt the way one does when a continued story is interrupted. He wrote well, you know. I could see everything exactly as he described it.'

Kay's voice trailed off, and Reynolds made no effort to break the hush.

Isn't he wonderful, Sara thought bitterly. *He knows if he speaks now, he'll break her train of thought. And he doesn't want it broken. He wants her to talk. He wants to be sure I'll listen. That all the thrusts will drive home. He's like a doctor with his hand on the patient's pulse. A strong, steady, knowing hand.*

And then Kay spoke again, as if there had been no silence; as if her words had been in a continuous flow.

'But, towards the end, the last few months before he was killed, he seemed to be under a strain——'

'Everyone was under a strain. I was in London only a few days myself then, but by the time I boarded my plane I was nervous as a cat.'

Tell her why! Tell her why, Sara wanted to cry out. *Tell her how you left me, half-dead with shock and grief. Not clear-eyed and calm; not easy and tranquil. Not able to talk about Mark, as if he had been long years dead!*

Kay shook her head. 'You look much too solid to have nerves. And it wasn't that sort of strain. It was as if he had ceased to believe that the battle could be won. At first, he had such hopes—was so full of plans for the future. But a kind of despair seemed to creep into his letters. I think he tried to conceal it, but when you are as close as we were—'

My God! How much of this am I supposed to endure! As close—as close—as close! Eight hours away. Three hundred miles away. Months and months and months away. But I won't break! I won't! Let Kay go on talking. Let Reynolds go on probing. I can see the long shining instrument in his hand, plunging it in deeper and deeper. Waiting to see me wince. Waiting to see me shudder and cringe. I shall think of something else! I shall think of Mark as I knew him. Take him out of this house. Back to the flat in South Street. Back to the warmth and the darkness. I shall see his face in the fire-light as he leaned back against the chair. And in the moonlight as his head lay on my pillow. I won't see him here! I never have. I never shall!

Reynolds's voice to Kay cut across Sara's thoughts like a whip. 'You must miss him very much.'

'That's why it has been such a help to have Sara here. It has kept me from talking about him. You see, it isn't as if he had been in business; you know, away every day from nine to six. His teaching hours were broken. He was a part of every day. Of all the hours of every day.'

'Of course, that made it much more difficult. But it also gave you more happiness to remember.'

Kay smiled and her face was suffused with warmth and tenderness. 'Happiness?' she echoed. And then her voice came through as strong and clear as a trumpet. 'Enough to last a lifetime!'

They're trying to turn me out of this house, between them! But I won't be turned out. I've built a life here and put a wall around it. Put a wall between me and Kay. Between me and Mark's wife. I'll lock the windows and bolt the door! I've put

it all together so carefully—so painfully. I won't have it destroyed. I'll be strong. I'll resist. I'll be like those jagged, furrowed rocks. I'll let all this beat against me. Let the salty, foamy water dash against me and pour over me. But I'll endure! Yet, even as she said the words, the sick envy which filled her was so strong, she wondered it did not beat against the others like waves of angry air. She turned her head and looked full at Kay, who sat there, smiling, as if the words 'enough happiness to last a lifetime' still rested on her mouth and she found the taste of them sweet. Sara went cold, and fear began to reach out its insidious hand.

Kay's voice went on, tinged with sadness and regret. 'He was so young. He had so much to live for. I should hate to feel that he faced the future with any fear—any uncertainty.'

'I'm afraid we all did that,' Reynolds replied. 'Still do. But whatever he had to face, he would have stood up to it bravely. With your help. I think you were his source of strength.'

Damn him! Damn him! Damn him! Sara's furious thoughts ringed her round in dizzying circles. He's torn down that wall I built! He's broken all my careful defences. He's made me see Mark here. Made me see him as Kay's husband. Made me see her as his wife. His darling Kay! She had so much more than I dreamed. Her life and Mark's were woven together like cloth on a loom. Now I am really bereaved! Now I have lost him. Now is he cold and dead! Her eyes turned to Reynolds and his face wavered under her sick gaze like a reflection in a warped mirror. And she thought, I am going to hate him for this for a very long time!

'You know, we Cornish people are supposed to be fey. To have a certain prescience, or second-sight. I'm not much given to that sort of thing—but there's something I have always known about Mark. Something which troubled me. He had a great capacity for pain.'

And Mark's face, unbidden this time, came before Sara's eyes. She could see the misery and the torment. She could

hear his voice, needle-thin with pain . . . 'You're not the only one who is suffering, Sara! You've only had this knowledge for a few minutes. I've had it for six months! I walk with it and talk with it and live with it! . . . My life has been cut in two. How do I know to which half I belong! . . . Sara, Sara! Can't you stop torturing to-morrow!' . . . *That was my gift to him, Sara thought. The gift I travelled from America to bring. The gift he came up from Cornwall to receive. Pain. Confusion and torment—and pain.*

Then, as if from the very centre of her being, came terror—and her mouth filled with water. Oh, my God! I'm going to be sick!

She stumbled to her feet, her hand pressed against the cold knot of nausea which was her stomach. She heard voices saying—'Sara, Sara; what is it?'—as if from a great distance. She heard her own voice replying: 'I have a blinding head. I'm sorry—I'm sorry.' And she felt her feet cross the room and heard the door close behind her. And knew that she was alone.

★ ★ ★

But it was not a nausea of the body which had seized her. It was a convulsed retching of the mind. A rejection, a vomiting forth of that which could not be digested, could not be contained. Ill-assorted substances, 'food to dream on', which she had greedily crammed into her mind until it was gorged and sickened, blocked and distended, like a swollen belly. All the false memories churning about in her, a curdled mass to be disgorged. To be got rid of.

She lay shuddering and icy cold, her mind twisting and retching as if it were a stomach with all its contents turned green and sour. All must be rejected. All which was not hers. Nothing left to feed on.

Ah! One more spasm! And yet another! All the dreams to be puked up like bile. And then would come the blessed emptiness and the knowledge that there was nothing left to lose.

★ ★ ★

The lights around the tiny harbour of St. Giles shone with a frosty gleam. Like most sea-coast places, the nights had a way of turning cold and sharp, and Reynolds shivered a little as he walked along the sea wall. And like the recurring waves of the sea he asked himself again and again if he had failed. If he'd risked everything on one play and it had been the wrong one. Or if he'd made it too late. Chosen red when the wheel was running black. Odd, when it should have been even. Well, if he had, then it was all over. He was exhausted. Spent. There was a morning train and, alone or with Sara, he'd be on it. Be on his way.

His thoughts turned back to the evening in Woodbine Cottage. It had seemed a lifetime. When Sara had risen and left the room so precipitantly, Kay had made a move to follow her.

'She's best left alone,' Reynolds had said. And he had put his hands on Kay's shoulders and held her there. 'I've known Sara a long time.'

And, still held by his hands, Kay had looked up into his face. 'And loved her a long time.'

'Yes.' And Reynolds thought how natural it had seemed to speak of Sara and his love for her, so simply and intimately. Perhaps it was because Kay, like himself, was a person of reticence and not a word too much would be said. 'Don't go to her. Please.'

And he had dropped his hands but Kay had made no move towards Sara's room. She had stood facing Reynolds, looking up at him with quiet candour. Reynolds thought he had never seen such simplicity and trust in a woman's face.

'Sara's been running away from her life,' he said. 'Hiding out. I've been trying to bring her back. Make her see where her place is.'

'With you.'

'Yes.'

And still Kay stood and looked at him and he knew there was more he must say. *How—how can I communicate to her a sense of urgency, of need without alarm? How can I explain*

my impatience And then Kay's own nature gave him his clue.

'I'm sorry if Sara's going will in any way upset your plans——' He paused for a moment as if uncertain what to say, although he already knew. Then went on. 'This is unfair, because I know you have a gentle heart—and because you know in a far more bitter way than I, what loneliness can be. This time without Sara has left a hollow in my life.'

'The hollow a head leaves on a pillow,' Kay said softly.

How sensitive she is, thought Reynolds. *What a delicate mind.* He felt that a moment of peril had been safely skirted: a reason of the heart would always make sense to a woman like Kay. And, besides, he meant every word of it, and more. He finished by saying, quite simply:

'I'm planning to leave to-morrow. I'd like to take Sara with me. I think, perhaps, she may be ready to go.'

As he had closed the gate of Woodbine Cottage he had seen the lights go out in the living-room. And, while he waited, a light turned on in an upstairs room. And he had sighed, feeling that the moment of danger, the moment of risk, had been passed. Kay. A woman to be trusted. A woman not to be hurt.

He had paced the length of the sea wall not once but a dozen times. And as he listened to the slap of the waves against the stones, he wondered if he was to fight all his battles against a watery background. He remembered that night in London, when he had stood looking out at the Thames and envying it its purpose, its destination. And that later night in New York, sitting on the terrace of his apartment overlooking the East River, waiting for Sara's boat to dock. He was God-damned sick of water! It was the element he felt the least at home in. He disliked its shifting liquescence, its glassy calm and its turbulent treachery. Earth and air were his elements and he felt equally happy in either. But water—he shivered. When he got back to America, he'd go away—out to the desert somewhere. Far

from the sight and sound of water. And he left the sea to murmur to itself.

Only the somnolent old night porter was on duty by the time Reynolds returned to The Cornwall Arms. He was about to pass quietly by his desk when a toughened, browned old hand thrust a paper at him.

'Call this number, it says. 'Tis important. That's what the lady said. Rare important. I'll put you through.'

Reynolds took the call in the little glass box which stood in a corner of the lounge. And, as he waited, he prayed that the voice might not be Kay's. When it came, it was the very ghost of a voice. But it was Sara's

'Carter! I was afraid I'd missed you! Can you hear me?'

'Barely.'

'I can't speak any louder. Besides, I don't want to wake the others. Is there a train out of here to-night?'

Reynolds gulped before he answered. By God, he hadn't failed! 'If there was, we've missed it.'

'You must take me away—not another night—not another——'

'Sara. Listen to me.'

'Yes, Carter.'

'There's a train in the morning. Stop thinking. Just get busy packing. We'll go to London to-morrow and fly back to America by the first plane we can get.'

'Yes.'

There was a hushed obedience in her voice.

'I'll pick you up. Be ready. That's all you've got to do. Be ready.'

'Yes. Yes, I will.' And then, with whispered gentleness: 'Bless you.'

Reynolds took a lurching step out of the little telephone box. The night porter looked at him with a startled eye. *He'll think I've had a drop too much, thought Reynolds. And so I have. A drop too much of hope!*

CHAPTER XVII

THE morning broke fresh and clear with a pleasant tingle of autumn in the air. Reynolds walked out of The Cornwall Arms with a light step. He had allowed himself plenty of time and started down the main street at a leisurely pace, enjoying the little village, really seeing it for the first time. When he had arrived the day before his mood had not been right for it. His eyes had been searching for only one thing: a house called 'Woodbine Cottage'—and Tredegar Road.

Now he sauntered past the fishmonger with his rows of silver fish neatly arranged on the marble counter, their scales sparkling in the bright sun. And the poulterer, where pheasant and grouse and partridge were hanging in brilliant feathered clusters. He passed the saddler, enjoying the smell of good leather, and lingered in front of a window filled with fishing-rods and tackle. There should be good fishing here, he thought; good sailing, too. He had forgotten his sudden dislike of the sea and remembered only happy holidays spent on Long Island Sound and off the coast of Maine. Everything had shifted back to normal.

He was aware, too, of the townspeople he passed on the way. Exceptionally attractive looking for the most part, with that air of independence and self-respect so often found in country towns. And when he neared the shingle beach he stood for a moment watching nets being mended and boats being given coats of fresh paint. Old weathered hands, surprisingly skilful, moved busily, while the smell of tobacco, coming from the short pipes clamped between tough old jaws, mingled with the tang of salt air and seaweed. And yet, in all their activity, there seemed a core of repose. A sense of the dignity of labour. Very satisfying to see. He stood for a moment longer watching them, conscious of the

gulls overhead and their wheeling, noiseless flight. And he thought that by to-morrow he and Sara would be flying and his spirit took wings.

Here was Tredegar Road. Up the hill now to Woodbine Cottage—and Sara. In spite of the cobbled stones and the steep hill, his step quickened. He ceased to observe, ceased to take in the pretty cottages which lined the road and nestled in the trees; or to be aware of the people who worked in their gardens or started out for walks with their dogs. Climbing steadily and swiftly, he arrived at Woodbine Cottage only slightly out of breath, just in time to see Sara open the front door and walk down the path to meet him.

She was dressed for the journey and that look of spurious youth with its sleep-walker's glaze had gone from her face, leaving it clear-eyed and resolute. Her step was quick and firm and Reynolds's heart gave a little jerk of happiness. This was the Sara he knew. This was the Sara he loved.

They reached the gate at almost the same moment, their hands touching on the latch. But before he could say the words of greeting which had formed on his lips, Sara spoke.

'Something quite dreadful has happened, Carter. You'd better come inside.'

★ ★ ★

After Sara had hung up the telephone the night before she went directly to bed. And she slept. Not the stupefied sleep of that first night in this house—but quietly. Dreamlessly. And she awakened refreshed and cleansed. Restored in body and spirit. She looked about the room, not with one greedy glance, but clinically and with detachment. It had become just a room. As a room in a hospital, where one has been ill and in delirium, becomes just a room. And she packed as one packs to leave a hospital. Without regret. Her mind running as swiftly into the future as it had fled into the past. All her movements were once again in their accustomed rhythm. Clothes laid carefully in place with

tissue-paper between the folds. Covers of jars securely turned. Stoppers of bottles tightly twisted. Sara had packed so often for plane journeys that her hands automatically took all the precautions against spilling liquid and ruined clothing. She was glad to be flying to New York, winging her way back to her old life. Her own life.

As she crossed from cupboard to suitcase, she saw herself in the mirror and stopped and considered her reflection. Yes, this is *you*, the glass confirmed. She stood for a moment enjoying the sense of fusion between herself and her restored image, as one watches raindrops spilling down a window-pane, one merging into the other, becoming indistinguishable and indivisible. She looked steadily at her mirrored reflection. *Yes, Sara Scott, we're together again, you and I!*

Then she glanced at her wrist watch and realized she was far too early. She had better slow down. She paused and lighted a cigarette and tasted the smoke for the first time in months. Then her eyes turned towards the desk. There was one last thing to be done. *I'll do it now, before I finish packing*, she thought. *Get it over with.* The note to Kay. It was cowardly, that she knew. She should have told her last night, or before Kay left for Trefallin in the morning. But she couldn't trust herself to give an adequate, a believable excuse. Besides, it was Wednesday, early-closing day at the bookshop and Kay would be back home soon after she herself had left. Better to do it like this.

She sat down at the desk and drew a piece of paper towards her. 'My dear Kay'—No, 'Kay dear'. And as she looked at the words she knew the term was not a conventional one. She meant it in truth. And in humility.

But with the pen held in her hand, she found herself unable to find the first word. She made half a dozen false starts in her mind, each more awkward and stilted than the other.

I'm a fine example of a writer, she told herself angrily. *n't put six simple words together! After all, this is my business. The thing I was born and trained to do. All I have to say is—* and then would come that blank in her mind and between

her and the sheet of white paper she would see Kay's face with its look of clean sweetness. And simplicity. And trust.

The pen froze in Sara's hand. How could she ever have spent a day in this house? Slept a night in this room?

Oh, I was so arrogant in my grief! So proud of my tears! And all the while I was weeping for myself!

And then, as clearly as if it had been written on the wall for her to read, she knew what quality Kay had which she herself lacked. It was the same quality her own mother had had,—she had known how to make a man feel strong.

The pen dropped from her hand and the ink spattered the page. What words have I to write to a woman like Kay!

Then the quiet of the house was broken by a noise. An unexpected, unfamiliar noise. With a dull sense of foreboding, Sara got to her feet and started out of the room. Then she heard the sound of smothered laughter and Kay's voice in soft reproach, 'Brian, darling!'

What was Kay doing home? She should have been on her way to Trefallin long ago!

She went quickly through to the dining-room and pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen. Kay, in a cotton house dress, turned and faced her.

'Sara!' And then with relief. 'Oh, you're up and dressed. I was afraid we'd awakened you.'

Sara stared at her in puzzled disbelief; and at Brian, crouched on the floor. 'But I don't understand. I thought you'd gone to the shop—'

'On your last day? Did you think I didn't guess? Didn't know?' Kay smiled at her. An affectionate, indulgent smile. 'Sara, my dear. The moment I saw Mr. Reynolds here yesterday, I began to say good-bye to you.'

'And you stayed home?'

'Of course. I was afraid you'd wait for me to come back and miss the only good, fast train.'

She turned to Brian while Sara thought—and *I was going to go, leaving her only a note!*

'There, darling, pick them all up. They're so sticky.'

Then, to Sara, 'I was making scones for your last English country breakfast and Brian was helping chop the raisins in the bowl and overturned the lot.'

Brian looked up at Sara, uncertainly.

'Hello, there,' said Sara, and got a suddenly shy yet friendly smile.

'Hello, there,' Brian echoed. 'That's very American, isn't it?'

'Well, pretty American. And that's a pretty American expression, too,' Sara replied and thought—*why couldn't I have spoken to him like this before? Put out a bridge. A child needs such a little bridge. But I let him flounder about in deep, strange waters.*

'But, really Kay, you didn't do all this on a—hunch?'

Kay nodded. Then smiled. A charming, almost mischievous smile. 'Well—I did slip downstairs and see that your suitcases had gone from the hall cupboard. And that ghastly headache—I knew it was having to make some sort of difficult decision. Besides, he's so nice, Sara. So very, very nice.'

And then, all at once, it all became a mixture of baking scones and brewing coffee and being asked if New York was really so fabulous—and Sara lost her momentary sense of foreboding and thought, *this is really so much better. I couldn't have written a proper note. I simply couldn't*

Then Brian was off to school in a rush with an embarrassed, 'Good-bye, Miss Scott,' conscious of all the past hostility lying between them, but something now which could be seen through, like a thinned-out hedge. Sara watched him go with regret; then became aware of Kay pouring fresh coffee into her cup, and speaking impulsively.

'Oh, Sara, I do hate to see you go! And I shall miss you. Miss you a great deal.'

Unaccustomed humility made Sara shy and gauche, and she was grateful when Kay went on speaking.

'It's strange that I should feel so close to you—as if there were some bond between us——' Her voice trailed off and her eyes suddenly had the look of one who tries to see

through mist. Then she turned and put her hand lightly over Sara's for a moment, a quick, affectionate gesture. 'We'll always be friends, won't we, Sara?'

'Of course.' And Sara thought, how nice to be speaking the truth. She *is* a friend, and I *shall* miss her.

'I mean, you'll write?' Kay went on.

'Oh, I'm a shocking correspondent. Like most writers, I hate to put down a word I don't get paid for.' But her smile softened her words.

'But I shall want to know if you're all right,' Kay persisted.

'Why shouldn't I be?'

'I don't know, quite. Only I wish——'

'You wish, what?'

'I liked your Mr. Reynolds so much. There's goodness and kindness and strength in him. The sort of strength you need.'

'That I need!' Sara's mouth was round with astonishment.

Kay looked at her with such tenderness and understanding that Sara felt all her reserves melting. The autumn sunlight which fell on them was lemon yellow, as pale and delicate as the yolk of a new-laid egg. It touched the jar of golden marmalade and the pat of Danish butter and Kay's soft brown hair. Sara felt bathed in a gentle glow and thought—how wise *she* is, this quiet girl. And then Kay spoke again with quick apology in her voice:

'I don't mean to sound interfering—but I do want you to be happy.'

'And you, Kay—what about you?'

'I'm better. Much better. The job has helped.'

'The job! And Brian!' Sara exclaimed in dismay. 'What will you do after I've gone?'

'I'll make some arrangement. You're not to worry. You remember in the beginning, it was only to be until I saw how it all worked out——'

Kay broke off abruptly and both women heard the sound of the gate being sharply closed, and footsteps on the walk. 'Who can that be at this hour? Did you order someone to call for your things?'

Sara shook her head. 'I've only hand luggage.' And then, 'It may be Carter Reynolds, though it's really much too early.'

'Or another food parcel,' smiled Kay, getting to her feet and starting towards the front door. And as she went, Sara felt that little tug at her nerves; that sense of incipient danger. Rising, she moved towards the window and saw a fair-haired youngster in Air Force blue coming up the steps to the front door. Only his head and shoulders were visible from the angle where she stood watching, but he seemed to be carrying something; something fairly heavy for he was bent slightly to one side as if thrown off balance by his burden.

For a single, dizzy moment Sara's thoughts swung back to London and Ian; but as the ring came at the door-bell she reminded herself that Ian had been invalided out of the Air Force before she had known him. And yet, there was a connexion in her mind between them. A disturbing connexion.

Kay opened the door and Sara saw the young man salute smartly, hand Kay an envelope and deposit a large carton on the floor, in one almost continuous movement. And then he was gone.

Kay stared down at the carton, then looked up and saw Sara coming towards her.

'What can this be, do you suppose?' And tore open the small envelope and took out a card; a man's visiting card. She read it with a perplexed frown. Then read it again, aloud. 'From Flight-Lieutenant Donald Robertson with his regrets and apologies that these articles should have lain so long undiscovered in a disused locker.'

Kay looked down from the note to the carton. 'What articles?'

And, as if the box itself had been transparent, Sara knew that the contents had belonged to Mark.

'I have my packing to finish, Kay—I'll leave you to cope——' and Sara turned away. *I'm through with all of this,* she said to herself. *It has nothing to do with me.* And she moved quickly as Kay knelt down by the carton to cut the

string which bound it. But she had barely reached the threshold of the door leading to the study when Kay's voice, edged and startled, called out.

'Oh, no!' And then, 'Sara—come back, please——'

Sara walked slowly back and saw that Kay had flipped open the cardboard lid of the carton, disclosing a small leather case; one which Mark had always kept in his car in case of an emergency assignment. Sara knew just what it would contain. Nothing very personal, she realized thankfully. Socks, underwear, an extra sweater, a change of shoes, a woollen scarf. Small adjuncts to comfort.

Kay's hands trembled on the lock.

'I'm afraid to open it.'

'Then don't. Another time will do.' Sara made a move as if to take the case out of her hands and return it to the carton. But Kay held it tightly. She looked up at Sara, her eyes shrouded with pain.

'All his things came back from London ages ago. I made myself go through everything then—dispose of everything. But again! I can't go through this again——'

'You needn't. Put it aside. It can wait.'

But even as she said the calm words, Sara knew they were useless. She could see those twin companions who had once walked by her own side. Dread and delight. Danger and desire. Even Kay was not exempt from their avid urging.

'No,' said Kay, trying to steady her voice and hands. 'I'm being weak and foolish. Let's do it quickly, Sara, and have it over and done with. While I still have you here to help me.'

And she snapped open the lock and lifted the lid of the case, disclosing the things which Sara had already seen in her mind's eye.

Sara stood back a little and took a cigarette and lighted it slowly and carefully. *I shall externalize these things*, she told herself firmly. *What are they, after all? What is a sweater, a pair of socks, a woollen scarf, a shoe? Something one sees in a shop window and then walks on.* Nothing was here for her. Nothing. A man's belongings had been returned to his own

home. To his own wife. To be opened, to be wept over a little, to be put away and, in time, forgotten. That was all as it should be. She would be detached. An observer. As one who watches an operation performed on an unidentified patient. No emotion, no involvement. As she had done in her early newspaper days. A skilful wound in an anonymous body. And having thus brought it all into place, put it into its proper perspective, she was immeasurably grateful that the purge, the cleansing, of the night before had so emptied her.

Kay was holding out a sweater in her arms. 'I knitted this for him. I must have made a dozen. I only hope he wore them.'

'He did.' And then, quickly, 'Anyone would have, with last winter's cold.'

'And socks—and a scarf. You know, I can't think why these things should turn up *now*—'

'They were probably an emergency supply. On the paper the boys always had a change of odds and ends tucked away somewhere. Dry socks and shoes can be very comforting.'

'Yes. Yes, that must be it. But in a locker at an air-field—'

'He was lost on a reconnaissance flight, wasn't he?'

'Yes.'

'Well, officers' lockers were often used to store things. In case of—*accident*—it could take a little time to sort them out.'

'Yes, of course.'

Kay put the things aside in a little heap on the floor. *There, that's over*, thought Sara. *Safely over*.

Then Kay lifted up a layer of paper in the carton which separated the leather case from something else.

'I don't remember this suit,' said Kay as she drew from the carton the coat to Mark's tweed suit. The suit he had worn that last, dreadful day.

Kay turned to the lining and saw the label. 'Oh, he bought it in London. Strange, a whole piece of his life about which I know so little—' Then again a question. 'But why only the coat?'

'He probably took it off to make the fleece-lined jacket

fit more easily. They wore those on flights, you know, and they're bulky. And that tweed looks fairly thick.'

'Yes.'

And Sara cautioned herself once again: *it has nothing to do with you. Nothing. It is a tweed coat. One of thousands. Forget that its arms once encircled you. Forget that its fabric has been wet with your tears. See it as a piece of cloth. Nothing less—nothing more.* And her hand remained steady as she flicked the ash from her cigarette, and watched Kay holding the coat to her as if, through physical contact with this unfamiliar garment, she could absorb some of his unfamiliar life. Then Kay's hands were suddenly arrested in their unconscious caress.

'There are things in the pockets! Pipe, keys, tobacco pouch!' Her eager hands pulled them out, like a child with a Christmas stocking.

And something in Sara said—it is time for you to go. This is the tug of danger you felt. Get away, now, before it is too late. She put out her cigarette.

'Look, Kay—I've still got my packing to finish. And I'm sure you'd rather be alone——'

'His note-book!' Kay exclaimed, as if Sara had not spoken. 'I gave him this for a birthday. See, it's marked "MK"——'

She held it out to Sara, her voice rushing on: 'We used to pretend it was an abbreviation for "Mark"—but it was really meant to be Mark and Kay. Everything I gave him was initialled like that.'

Kay sat back on her heels and riffled quickly through the pages, reading random bits aloud: 'Lunch at the Savoy . . . Appointment four o'clock No. 10 Downing Street . . .'

Kay looked up: 'That's Churchill, isn't it?' And, without waiting for an answer, went on reading.

'Observe removal of time bomb and make wire recording on the spot . . .'

'Watching them remove a time bomb! Wasn't that a very dangerous thing to be doing, Sara?'

'Very dangerous.'

And her mind ran on: frightfully dangerous! To kneel

there in the dust and rubble beside a strange man, conscious only of a dark, averted profile and fine brown hands holding the mike. And of the air around them beating with excitement of such quality that the bomb seemed quite tame and filled with a distinctly inferior danger. Sharing a flask of whisky handed over without a word and lips placed where lips had been. No words at all until he stood beside her at the waiting taxi and she asked: where are you going? . . . And he replied, with you!

Then she became aware again of Kay's voice running on, reciting appointments, and thought—*Don't let my name appear! Don't let him have written, 'Lunch with Sara. Dinner with Sara. Week-end with Sara.'* No use Kay being hurt now. Not when it was all over. When she had loosened that last desperate grasp.

'Invasion rehearsal . . . Meet Colonel . . . Oh, dear, what a name!' Kay spelled it out. 'B-r-y-n-c-z-k-i.' Then looked closer at the page. 'What's this he's added? Remember, pronounced Brinski.'

Now I know why Ian came to my mind, thought Sara. Why that boy in Air Force blue sent a tremble of fear up my spine. And, as clearly as in a photograph, Sara saw gay, fair-haired Ian—who looked so absurdly young to have been in the Battle of Britain; Ian whom she had never seen in his Air Force blue—come bounding into Mark's hotel room that last, wet, dark morning. She saw him standing there, laughing and shaking the rain from his shoulders like a spaniel, and saying—'but you pronounce it, *Brinski*.' And the shivering thought seized her, that it was such tenuous, invisible threads as these which bound us to the unforeseen, to the unknown.

Then she closed the shutter of her mind and the picture was gone; and in its place she saw Kay looking up at her, the open note-book in her hand and her face shining with unbelievable happiness.

'Sara! A note to me!'

And Sara thought—this is it. This is the unknown. This is the unforeseen.

'Sara, it is as if he had reached out and touched me!'

And Kay held the note-book cradled in her hand as if she could feel the beat of the words, like the beat of a heart.

Sara drew in a deep, whistling breath and her thoughts came in quick, protesting gasps: *This—I—cannot—bear. This—is—asking—just—that—little—bit—too—much . . .*

Then Kay, her face still flooded with happiness, started to read the note in a soft murmur, unconscious that her words were audible: 'My dear love—I'm scribbling this note on my knee as the car jolts along.'

Sara turned her eyes away and tried to close her ears against the words. *Oh, God! Make me deaf!* And this cry for help was barely uttered when silence engulfed her. Lapped around her in comforting waves. And Sara thought, this is an answer to prayer! Then she realized that the silence had taken on an odd texture. It was the silence of tension, of suspended breath. The silence of shock.

Sara forced herself to look at Kay and saw that her face was drained of colour; even her lips were chalky as they mouthed the words of the letter in a dull, expressionless voice: '" . . . when you left me just now, I called after you to say . . .",'

Kay broke off and spoke to Sara in that same, stunned voice: 'This letter was written the very day he was killed. I wasn't in London. I was here. It's not for me, Sara—it *can't* be!'

She turned back to the letter, reading on in the toneless voice of a child spelling out a difficult lesson which conveyed only an intermittent message to the brain.

'". . . when I get back, I'm going to ask for a holiday; a time to try to make secure once more our little island. You have been, my sweet, a light in the darkness . . .",'

Kay's throat contracted as if the words were stones. 'Not meant for me.' Not for me.'

Sara cried out sharply, before she could bite back the words: 'Don't read it! Don't look at it!' And then, more softly, as Kay turned a pain-clouded eye to her: 'It's not meant for you. That's what you said just now, wasn't it?'

'Yes, Yes, it is. Thank you, Sara.'

Her voice was polite; the same contained politeness Sara had felt in Brian. Kay put the note-book gently on the table as if it were something both fragile and dangerous—something to be handled with great care. And she continued to sit on the floor beside the carton, one hand resting on the tweed coat, as if unconsciously seeking to draw some hidden truth from it. Then her face suddenly contracted in a spasm of grief and she turned away, humiliation and apology in the very bend of her body.

'I'm sorry. I don't mean to behave like this, Sara. Give me a moment. Just a moment——'

Ah, thought Sara. There speaks the inexperience of grief! Wait, she wanted to say. All you have felt now is that the blade is sharp. This is only the first touch of the sword. The touch which warns you, '*en garde!*' This will not be a clean plunge to the heart, but a slow inching in of sorrow. Wait!

The note-book lay open on the table between them and Sara had only to take one quiet step and the words were there for her to read.

'... You have been, my sweet, a light in the darkness. A generous fire at which I have been able to warm my hands and my heart. If I have given you less than you deserve—you have given me more than any man could ask. Whatever may happen, I am forever in your debt. Mark.'

Sara read the words over and over until they ran together like ribbons of water. Then, through the striated air, she saw Kay turn wearily back, all the abundant health and vigour drained out of her, and lean on the side of the carton to rise to her feet.

How soon we learn to need props! How quick the hand is to sense something strong enough to lean on!

'Sara, I don't really think I can do anything more about these things, just now. Put them back, will you?'

She turned away from the carton as if its contents had become alien; then stared at Sara's face.

'Why, Sara! You're weeping——'

And Sara put her hands to her cheeks and found them scalded with tears which ran, hot and salty, through her fingers. She backed a step or two away from the table and stammered: 'I didn't know—I didn't realize.' She leant over quickly and, picking up the tweed coat, started to fold it and till her tears fell. And she thought, this coat was destined to be wept on.

'Don't weep, Sara. *I'm* not——'

'You will.'

'Yes. After a time, I suppose.'

Sara kept her back turned while she put the tweed coat back in the carton; then folded the sweater, the socks, the woollen scarf which had more than once brought warmth to her throat. The suede shoes. The pipe. The tobacco pouch. The keys. Everything put away, save the note-book. And when she straightened up, Kay was holding it in the palm of her hand.

'What a little thing. How ordinary looking, to hold all one's happiness.'

'Not all! You had years and years!'

'Yes. Yes, I did.'

'Then remember them.'

'I do. That is why this is so dreadful——'

'Would it be easier to bear if you had had nothing? Put this behind you, Kay. Close a door on it. Lock it.'

'Yes, that is what I must do. Help me, Sara!'

'But I shan't be here!'

'You're not going, now?'

'I must. I should have gone long, long ago.'

Kay looked down once more at the open note-book. 'My dear love,' she repeated, but there was no caress in her voice when she spoke the words. 'Mark never called me that.'

'Aren't you glad? Aren't you grateful he didn't call her by your own, endearing names? You were, "my dear wife"—"my darling wife"—"my darling Kay"!'—

'Yes. I was his "darling Kay"—right to the very last.' She looked at Sara with touching gratitude. 'How good you are to me, Sara! To remind me——' And as her voice

ailed off, Sara could see her clinging to this little comfort: Mark had still called her that to the last. And Sara's mind added—she still was that, to the last.

'Sara, you can't leave me!' Kay was saying. 'I need you. I can't face this alone. Not yet.'

Sara drew back as one draws back from the edge of an abyss. *Oh, no! She can't ask me that! She can't! I made my decision last night. I must go. Nothing must hold me here!*

'Surely there's someone—some friend, to whom you feel really close—who could be with you—'

Kay shook her head slowly, stubbornly. 'I must go on living here. Brian must grow up here. Everyone loved Mark so—respected him so. They must never know. And I couldn't conceal that something dreadful had happened. Not at first. I'm not very good at concealing.'

And Sara looked at her candid brow, her widely spaced eyes, her trustful mouth and thought—*no, concealment would not be your talent.*

'Sara, she must have known that he had a wife, and a child—'

'Perhaps not.'

'Mark would have told her. It wasn't in his nature to deceive.'

'He deceived you.' And then, quickly, 'I'm sorry.'

Kay put her hand on Sara's arm, an unaccustomed gesture, and Sara thought, it's like a child asking, 'Help me across the street'.

'Stay with me, Sara—if it's only another day. Let me talk it out. I can with you. You see, it's all quite different. You're going away. And you didn't know Mark.'

Sara instinctively turned away from the impact of these words and saw, through the window, Reynolds walking up the hill.

'Here's Carter Reynolds, coming for me now.'

'Tell him you're not going, Sara. Not to-day.' Kay made a blind gesture towards the carton. 'These—these things arriving without warning should be reason enough. He's so very kind—so very understanding.'

Sara watched Kay move towards the stairs and it hurt her to see the heavy step, the strong, young body so abjectly turned away.

Then she hurried to meet Reynolds at the gate.

Reynolds had followed Sara into the house and had sat quietly, receptively, while she told the whole story. He had taken it all in, understood it all. He had made no comment, he had asked no questions. Once or twice his eyes had travelled to the carton, where the sleeve of a tweed coat could be glimpsed; and to the open note-book lying on the table. A piece of cloth, a scrap of paper. A coat hanging neglected in a locker; a note-book lying forgotten in a pocket. Poor fellow! Trying so desperately to make amends! My first guess was right, thought Reynolds: his conscience gave him hell. And poor Kay! This second death—this deeper loss. He turned back to Sara and watched her face and listened to her voice, and marvelled at the control in both.

When Sara finished speaking, Reynolds sat still for a moment before he broke the silence. And when he spoke, his voice was gentle.

‘Well, Sara—this is the unloaded gun that goes off——’

‘And wounds the innocent.’

As Sara said these words, she threw back her head and looked upwards. ‘Listen! You can hear her walking back and forth—back and forth, trying to take it in. Trying to face the fact that her husband loved another woman.’ Sara stood there listening as if she found a bruising echo in every footfall; and Reynolds looked at her and thought he had never seen her look so lovely, or seen her face so filled with sadness and compassion.

‘I’ve walked all those bitter steps. I can’t leave her now. I must see her through the worst of it. I owe it to her. I owe it to Mark.’

Reynolds rose to his feet, his face and voice deeply troubled. ‘It’s difficult to know what to say, Sara; very difficult. Do you really think you can help?’

'I must try. You see, Kay is right in her reasons for wanting me to stay. She doesn't want anyone who is intimately connected with her life to see her, until she can make a face to show the world. And this little Cornish village is a world by itself. A world in which Mark was loved and respected; where Brian will grow up and go to his father's school. The time Mark spent with me was not part of the pattern of his life.'

'That it should be *you* who must try to comfort her!'

'But you must understand she doesn't want me here only for herself. It's for Brian. And for Mark. To protect them.'

'That's very generous. Very touching.'

'She's the kind of woman you should have fallen in love with.'

'Yes. A man could find peace and contentment and great happiness with her. Only I happen to be in love with you, Sara.'

Sara was very quiet for a moment. She crossed the room and picked up a cigarette and tapped it thoughtfully on the back of her hand; then put it down, unlighted.

'I'll let you decide, Carter. Do you want me to leave with you now? If you say "yes"—then I shall. I'm dressed. I'm packed. I'm ready to go. Kay is upstairs. She won't know until it is too late. Brian is still at school and he expected to find me gone by the time he came home. Everything will be quite normal—except Kay.'

'If only you had left last night!' Reynolds burst out.

'I tried.'

'I know! I know! While I was out walking around that bloody sea wall, thinking about us!'

'It won't be for long. Perhaps not more than a day or two. Kay is brave and she is strong; but she needs this little time. And she needs the presence of someone to whom she can talk without a sense of betrayal. In Kay's eyes, I am a stranger. I shall be leaving. And I didn't know Mark. You see, that is the operative phrase: I didn't know Mark.'

The silence which followed was punctuated by Kay's

footsteps overhead. They were more rapid now, as if the room had become a cage—a cage too small to hold a woman and her expanding imagination.

‘If you’re willing to take the risk,’ Reynolds said slowly.

‘What risk?’

‘I wish I knew.’

As he spoke, the shrill whistle of the locomotive pierced the air. Both Sara and Reynolds could visualize their train pulling out of the tiny station; could hear the station-master’s voice calling out—‘Local to Truro—Change for London.’ And Sara’s thoughts added, ‘Change for New York—Change for America and for home.’ Too late, now.

‘That settles it—for to-day, anyway.’

‘There’s still a train to-night,’ was Reynolds’s reply. But before Sara could answer, there was a bang at the gate.

‘Brian!’ she exclaimed.

‘Isn’t it early for him to be coming home?’

‘Yes. No—no, it isn’t. It’s his sports afternoon. forgot.’ The flying footsteps raced up the path. ‘Carter, take him in tow, will you? Take him off our hands for the rest of the day?’

Brian burst into the room and stopped abruptly as he saw Sara. ‘Oh, it’s you, Miss Scott—I thought you’d have gone——’ Then his eyes fell on Reynolds and his face lighted up with pure pleasure.

‘I say, Mr. Reynolds! I didn’t expect to see you again, sir!’

‘My plans changed a little. I was hoping you’d help me amuse myself for the afternoon——’

‘It’s our sports day and we’re playing a match against our rival team.’

‘Cricket match?’

‘Yes, sir. I don’t suppose you’d care to come along and watch, would you, sir? I’m the strongest bat—and I’m learning to bowl googlies.’

‘Googlies!’

‘Off-break ball with leg-break action.’

'I see. That makes it quite clear,' was Reynolds's slightly dazed reply. 'After the match, do you think we might take in the early cinema?'

'That would be wizard! Super-duper wizard!' Then, with a mixture of shyness and pride, he added: 'That's rather American, isn't it, sir? The "super-duper" part?'

'Rather!'

As Brian saw Reynolds reach for his hat, he turned towards the stairs: 'I think I'd better ask my Mum about the cinema——'

Sara quickly blocked his way. 'Your mother's lying down, Brian. She has a bad headache. Do you think you might take my say-so, for once?'

Brian considered for a moment. 'Yes, I think I could.' Then with the nearest thing to a grin which Sara had ever seen on his face, he added, 'Besides, it's something I want most awfully to do!'

Brian had the front door open in a flash, while Reynolds paused to say to Sara, 'You can tell Kay that the men will be out until they come back!'

Then the door closed and Sara was alone in the house with Kay, and only a shared sorrow for their companion.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE afternoon passed in a haze of misery, and darkness had settled about the house before Sara saw Kay fall into an unquiet sleep, a wet handkerchief still tightly held in one hand. Sara waited for the hand to relax, wanting to make certain Kay was sleeping before she left her.

She leaned back in the chair and let herself go slack; let her muscles unknot and her nerves unwind. I'm squeezed out. I've run dry, she thought. I'm like a river-bed where only stones and sand mark where fresh water once has been. There's not a word of solace left in me. All these suffering hours I have felt like someone without an arm trying to comfort a man who still reaches out with his missing hand.

Oh, you'll manage splendidly after a time—you'll wonder why you ever needed two!

She looked at Kay, her hot face resting against the rumpled linen of the pillow. Now she could see all the grief which she had so resentfully and stupidly missed. She remembered standing out in the road that first day and saying to herself, how healthy she looks! How unwounded and unscarred! Where are the twisted hands, the ravaged mouth, the tear-reddened eyes!?

But sitting here by her side, she understood. For when Mark had died, it had been like seeing a loved one off on a long journey to an unknown land; he would be distant in body, but their relation would remain intact. This which had happened to-day was the very essence of loss. She was grieving now. Grieving for a lost image, a lost faith, a lost love. And a kind of anger rose in her that Kay should have been so transformed. All her sweet serenity, her trust and her dignity so marred.

Kay's hand suddenly grew limp and the handkerchief fell to the floor; she stirred a little, then turned her face to the wall.

Sara rose noiselessly and went out, closing the door gently behind her. She stood for a moment in the hall, breathing in gratefully an air which was not grief-sodden. Then went on down the stairs, to find that Reynolds was waiting for her in the semi-lighted room.

'Where's Brian?'

'Well, when we came back and found the house dark and quiet, I persuaded him to tip-toe up to bed.'

'I never heard a sound——'

'He thought it was great fun. Made a big thing about taking off his shoes and pretending he was a burglar. You know how kids love games.'

'When did you get back?'

'About twenty minutes ago.'

'You had Brian on your hands for hours!'

'I enjoyed it. And I know all about googlies.' Then his voice sobered 'How is Kay?'

'Asleep, I hope.'

'And you, Sara—how are you?'

'I don't really know how I am. All right, I guess.'

Reynolds reached into his pocket. When we stopped at The Cornwall Arms for what Brian dubbed a "smashing" tea. I slipped this out of my bag. I thought you might need a drink.

Sara looked at the flask in his hand. 'I think I do.'

'Where are the glasses?'

'In the dining-room. The corner cupboard to your right.'

'I don't suppose there's any soda—'

'Tap-water will do.'

When Reynolds returned with a drink for her, and one for himself, Sara took hers and drank thirstily and felt the tension in her throat ease a bit.

Reynolds gave her time by talking a little. 'I met some of the local people at the match to-day. Brian did the honours. I liked them. Got more of a feel about the place. There's a nice life to be had in a village like this. A pity Mark ever left it.'

'It's all a pity. All a waste,' She put down her empty glass and let herself sink into a chair.

'Have another?'

'Later, perhaps.'

'Want some more lights on?'

'No! No, please!'

Reynolds sat down opposite her, close to her.

'You must have had a pretty bad time.'

'Pretty bad.'

Reynolds waited for her to say more. He leaned over and offered her a cigarette and saw how steady the hand was that took it. She drew in the smoke, then started to speak. There was no emotional pitch to her voice; it was even and controlled. A carry-over, Reynolds thought, from the control she had had to impose on herself during the hours she had spent with Kay.

'At first, Kay couldn't talk, couldn't think, couldn't cry. Then it started. First the tears, then the questions. This

woman—what did I suppose she was like. Was she young? Was she beautiful? Was she good? Was she bad? *How* did they meet? *When* did they meet? *How* did it happen?

Sara paused and the ash shivered at the tip of her cigarette and fell to the floor.

All these questions to *me*, Carter—when I could answer everything, and nothing.'

'It's been rather more than you bargained for——'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry.'

'First, I thought of what you had said to her last night and how she had responded to it: that she had had enough happiness to last a lifetime. I told her to remember all the happy times, relive them, make them blot out everything else. To remember how dearly he had loved her: that no man writes a woman every day unless the bond is strong, unless he wishes it to endure.'

Sara shook her head and sighed. 'But it wasn't enough. The picture of that unknown woman tormented her. She wanted to know, did I think it had been love!'

She looked at the glowing end of her cigarette for a moment and watched the smoke curl upwards. And as it drifted towards the ceiling, her eyes followed it and Reynolds knew her thoughts were with Kay. She looked down and, drawing an ash-tray towards her, very carefully and thoroughly ground out the cigarette. Then, with a little, unfamiliar, out-flung gesture of her hands, a gesture of defeat, she spoke:

'So, I tore it all down. I felt like a demolition squad attacking a house which was doomed to die. First the turret from which the flag used to fly; then, stone by stone and brick by brick, I destroyed it all, down to the ruined foundations.'

She leaned back in the chair and half-closed her eyes, as if recalling the exact words and tone she had used. Reynolds thought, it's like hearing the play-back of a recording, and he could picture Kay listening and hoping to find some restorative in Sara's words.

‘You must remember the conditions under which they probably met . . . abnormal . . . confused. In wartime experiences like this happened to everyone . . . well, almost everyone . . . just a casual something . . . as ships that pass in the night sort of thing . . . born of loneliness and danger and strangeness . . . torn up from one’s roots and seeking friendly soil . . .’

Sara stopped abruptly. ‘I went on and on—every cliché I had ever read or written ran off my tongue like oil. But as long as she listened, I talked. I told her that everything was larger than life during that time. People spoke lightly of serious things and extravagantly of trivial things. A man lost a leg and it was “a bit of a bother”. He lost his theatre ticket and it was a major catastrophe. A girl he’d met once failed to turn up, and the world was black. Though he had already forgotten her name. One has to have emphasis in life, and if you can’t put it on the real things—if they’re too serious to be spoken of seriously—then you attach it to the unimportant, the frivolous, the transitory. You cloaked impermanence with importance. It gave life balance and proportion.’ She looked up at Reynolds. ‘You see, Carter, it was just a lot of unfamiliar words and phrases for her to focus on; specious generalities to distract her.’ She sighed and a shudder of distaste passed over her face.

‘I tried to reduce it all to a shabby formula: the lonely man and the easy woman.’

Sara paused for a moment and her face was so bleached with strain that Reynolds found it almost unbearable. But he knew this was not the moment for sympathy. So he got to his feet. ‘I think you’re about ready for that second drink.’

When he had mixed and brought it to her, she took the glass almost absently from his hand, and started speaking again, as if her thoughts had been continuous.

‘I thought, for a time, that it had satisfied her. But her mind started to turn back to those opening words of the letter: “My dear love”. She repeated them over and over again, with a sort of tormented pleasure; the way a saint wears a hair shirt. And she kept saying that he couldn’t

have called a woman "his dear love" unless she had been his dear love!

'At the time, I kept telling her, he felt she was that, *at the time*. An abnormal time, I reminded her once again.

'Then she asked me—would it have lasted, and for how long!

'Don't you see, Carter—it was like being *myself*! That was what *I* had wanted to ask. Only now it was too late, because Mark was lying dead between us.' Sara's voice choked suddenly, as if dust had filled her mouth. 'I—I almost hated him!'

'Last night, you hated me.'

'I think—I think I hate *love*!'

The untouch'd glass trembled in her hand and she put it down and got to her feet abruptly and turned her face away. As she did so, Kay came quietly down the stairs and paused on the landing and looked through heavy eyes into the dimness of the room below. She was still in her rumpled cotton dress and her face was pale and damp, as if it had been freshly bathed; and her soft hair was beaded with drops of water and clung damply to her face and neck. She had a drowned, submerged look and when she spoke, her voice came through muffled and misted over.

'Sara—is that you, Sara?'

'Yes. Of course. I thought you were asleep——'

'I was. At least, I think I was. I kept dreaming about Mark.'

'That was natural.'

'But I couldn't see him alone! I'll never again be able to think of him alone. Always someone else——'

Kay had started down the stairs as she spoke, but she paused again as she echoed: 'Someone else! Aren't those dreadful words, Sara?'

'Dreadful.'

Then Kay saw Reynolds, who got to his feet as she came into the room. A look of acute embarrassment came over her face, and Sara spoke quickly.

'It's all right, Kay. He knows.'

Kay turned an astonished face to her. 'You told him?' Reynolds's quiet voice answered Kay. 'Sara didn't have to tell me. I knew.'

'You mean Mark told you? Oh, no, he couldn't have. You said you had only met him once. It isn't the kind of thing one tells an acquaintance!'

Both Sara and Reynolds felt the beat of peril in the air. But Reynolds kept his voice untroubled and reasonable.

'The circumstances under which we met were—odd.'

And Sara crossed to Kay, coming between her and Reynolds, as if to screen him from her inquiring thoughts.

'Let me make you some hot milk. And I've some sleeping tablets in my bag. You need rest, Kay. Good long hours of rest.'

But Kay turned away from her and her voice took on a curious stubbornness.

'No. I don't want to escape from this into sleep, Sara. I want to see it clearly and see it whole. I must live with this knowledge for the rest of my life, you know. One night's sleep is no solution.'

'Would you like me to make you some tea?' Sara asked. But the words were barely spoken when Kay made, what was for her an impatient gesture of refusal, as if her thoughts were pursuing their own way and would bear no distraction.

Reynolds felt an increasing uneasiness. What I am seeing, he told himself, is an uncomplicated mind which senses complication; as a mathematician senses disarrangement in a set of algebraic symbols. He may not see the error at first glance, but the sense of something out of place is immediately there; something which must be found and explained and set right.

He moved a chair forward for Kay and as she sat down, she looked up suddenly into his face and Reynolds could almost feel the click of her thought as it fell into place, as the ball of a roulette wheel falls into its destined number.

'Mark didn't tell you. She told you. You must have known her.'

Reynolds felt as if threads of light were laced across the

room between him and Sara which, once seen, would illumine the whole dark past. But he went to his own chair and sat down again before replying; before he felt it was safe for him to reply.

'Yes. I knew her.'

Sara sat as still and stiff as if she had been poured into a mould. She dared not look at Reynolds or at Kay. She could only sit and listen to the thudding beat of her own heart, and wait.

Kay had given a soft 'Ah——' as if Reynolds's answer had been rewarding. She turned a little in her chair, towards him.

'Perhaps it would help a little if you would tell me what she is like.'

'Please——' 'I'd rather not. After all, nothing can be gained——'

'Or lost.'

And she waited for him to speak with a quiet compulsion which brought the undesired words to his lips.

'Actually, I only saw her once or twice in London——'

'Had you met her there?'

'No. I'd seen her in Paris a few months before.'

'She was French?'

'Well, cosmopolitan, I should say.'

'But she was living in London?'

'Temporarily. She had a job there. I wish you'd let me tell you something of what life was like in London at that time——'

'Sara has told me,' Kay interrupted.

'But not from a man's point of view. I think that's important.'

'Was she attractive?'

'In a way quite different from your own. Look, this is all past and done with——'

'A woman with a job in London. I hadn't thought of that. What sort of job?'

'Some sort of government thing. That's what threw them together: his broadcasts. Her job entailed liaison work with the B.B.C.'

Reynolds paused, his face and the palms of his hands wet with nerves. Kay's questions were soft and quiet, but, underneath, he was aware of a stubborn and relentless flow.

Sara saw Reynolds's increasing strain, yet dared not try to lessen it by breaking in for fear Kay would ask if she, too, had known the woman. Her only safety, if there was any safety to be had, lay in silence. From the corner of her eye as she sat immobile, she saw the second drink Reynolds had poured for her. It stood, untouched, on the table beside her. Inching her hand towards it, without turning her eyes, she closed her fingers gratefully around the glass and raised it to her mouth. *Slowly, slowly!* she cautioned herself. *You've had no food for hours.* And she concentrated on the simple act of taking small, measured swallows, watching the liquid diminish in the glass and feeling the queasiness subside a little in her stomach. Then she realized that Reynolds was speaking to Kay again, his voice kind and persuasive.

'I tried to tell you once before what it was all like—that time in London—from a man's point of view. I think you should try to see it that way. It's difficult, I know; but it will help you a lot more than trying to visualize the woman. Will you listen?'

Sara looked at him for the first time since Kay had come into the room and, even though the light was dim, she could see the stinging drops of sweat on his forehead and around his mouth. But he kept his body relaxed and his eyes steady as he waited for Kay to reply. She can't refuse him! She can't! thought Sara. He means to save her pain, and to save me humiliation. She must *feel* that. Then Reynolds put out his hand and touched Kay on the arm. Sara knew that touch. There was gentleness and strength in it.

'Will you listen? Will you bear with me for a moment? I only want to help.'

'Yes. I'll listen.' And Kay turned her face obediently to his.

'You know, London, normally, is a sober city. But during these war years, it was full of excitement and danger and nerves. People, nice people, did things they could never

have done under normal conditions. During those months in London, your husband was a man he had never been before. A man he would never be again. That interlude was an island in his life. But, in spite of all this, for every man there's one woman. If he's fortunate, he marries her. And having married her, he always comes back to her. These—these other attractions—they can cut deep. They leave an imprint. Sometimes a scar. And sometimes they leave a man richer if, in the final analysis, he knows where he belongs. I think Mark belonged here.'

Kay looked about the room, then shook her head slowly, sadly. 'I can't see him here. And I can't see him alone. Not ever again. All those months in London—someone else—'

'But he wrote you every day,' came Sara's impetuous words.

Kay's face lighted up, but not with reassurance. 'Ah, yes, yes. His letters! Now I see!' And she turned to Reynolds.

'Don't you remember, only last night I told you I began to feel misery and confusion in his letters towards the last? A kind of despair? That is what it was!'

Reynolds could feel the tentacles of her mind reaching out for something to take hold of—something with truth and substance. Her voice took on a pitch of excitement as she faced Sara.

'You see, Sara, you were wrong! You tried to be kind, tried to tell me it was something casual and unimportant. But you were wrong. One is not thrown into despair over a casual relationship! It was something much more than that. Something of equal value to his marriage. Something which *threatened* his marriage!' She swung back to Reynolds 'That's what I felt and couldn't understand. Then, when he was killed, I thought it had been a sense of impending death. But I was wrong. Just as Sara was wrong. You knew her. You can tell me this. She was a woman he could have loved deeply, wasn't she? Not someone casual and cheap and impermanent?'

Reynolds was silent and Kay sighed and turned her head away. 'You see—you see—it's true.'

"Then she looked back and there was a puzzled frown on her face and her tear-heavy eyes were bewildered and searching. 'There is something here I do not understand—something that I almost know——' And then slowly, like a child adding up a simple sum, her voice went on: 'Either Mark was torn between me and this woman, or——' She broke off and covered her face with her hands. 'Oh, no!'

Then Reynolds spoke. 'Please, Kay—don't try to puzzle it out. It's all over.' But she drew her hands away from her stricken face and went on as if he hadn't spoken.

'—or, he had already ceased to love me. That is why I felt such wretchedness in his letters. He didn't know how to tell me. There was no longer any truth between us.' Her voice slowed down and grew so low she might almost have been speaking to herself. 'I thought "someone else" was a dreadful thing to face, but I know something still more dreadful. To have become unwanted and unloved. He probably talked about me—and said, "when this is over I can get free—I can leave her, leave my wife—and be with you always".' Her voice trailed away and it was almost in a whisper that she added, 'Be with his dear love.'

Kay stood there, her head drooping, her hands hanging by her sides, the fingers curled in. Then she looked up and spoke with odd, polite dignity.

'Would you please both leave me? This is going to take a great deal of getting used to. I think I need to be alone.'

She walked quietly towards the stairs and the very air about her seemed filled with suffering and humiliation. Then Sara crossed to her and put her hand gently on Kay's arm and stopped her as she was about to put her foot on the first tread of the stairs.

'When I first came here, Kay, and you knew I had lost someone I loved, you tried to comfort me. You told me something which had helped you, in the hope that it might also help me. I can't give you any words of my own to comfort you—but I can share with you words of Mark's.'

Reynolds heard a strange, sharp sound and knew it was the sucking in of his own astonished breath. And Sara's voice

went on, quietly and steadily. And Kay listened, one hand resting on the banister as if poised for flight.

'Do you know what he said to me—almost the last words he ever said to me? It was in answer to all my probing and demanding; my trying to tear my way into his mind and into his heart. Women can be brutal, Kay. Particularly women who are in love and who are insecure. You don't know that. "All those other years," I kept saying. "They counted. They were important. They still are." And Mark looked at me and said, "Do you want me to say that a woman who married me and a child who belongs to me, do not count? Is that the kind of man you could love"?''

Sara reached her hand out towards Kay, as if it held a treasure. 'Take those words, Kay. Those words of Mark's. I give them to you.'

Reynolds's voice cut in harshly: 'Sara! For God's sake!'

'It's all right, Carter. It had to be said. I don't think Kay should lose him twice.'

Kay stood at the foot of the stairs, one hand still resting on the banister. 'That note was for you. You were his "dear love——"'

'Yes.'

'Then, what are you doing in this house? Why did you come here?'

'To steal from you,' was Sara's quiet reply. 'Oh, not at first. In the beginning I meant only to walk by his house. See it just once, before I left England for ever. Then you ran out and spoke to me in the road and brought me inside. And I found it was Mark's room which was to be let. I saw his desk, his chair, his books. And I told myself—only this one night. But I couldn't leave. I couldn't—after that tormenting glimpse of a life I hadn't shared. A life in which I had no place. So I stayed on, stealing a little of it day by day—dreaming my way back into it and trying to make it mine.'

'You mean, you wanted to pretend to yourself that *you* had been his wife? That *my* life had been *yours*?''

'Yes.'

Kay's hand dropped from the banister and as she faced

Sara Reynolds realized that he was witnessing that frightening thing: the anger of a quiet woman. It gathered like a cloud, and burst like a deluge. But Sara never moved when Kay turned on her.

'If you really wanted to pry into my life, into Mark's life, you couldn't have learned it all in these few weeks! What more would you like to know? There's so much I can tell you. I can help you complete the picture you've been trying to create. Listen! Listen and remember! I was married here in this village, in the church on the hill. I spent my wedding night in this house. Do you want to know what Mark said to me when he brought me through that door? Do you want to know what his first words were when he came to me that night? And when he woke the next morning and found me in his arms and realized that we were truly man and wife? And when I found out I was going to have Brian? And when Brian was born in that room upstairs?'

Kay stopped speaking as abruptly as she had started. She began to tremble violently. Even her mouth was unsteady as she spoke in a voice which was barely audible.

'I'm sorry, Sara. That was a shocking thing to do.'

She left the foot of the stairs and walked stiffly over to the table where a pitcher of water stood and a glass. She tried to pour the water but her hand shook so uncontrollably that the water spilled and ran into a pool on the tray. Sara crossed to her and took the pitcher out of her unresisting hand. She filled the glass with water and handed it to Kay.

'Thank you,' Kay said in that all but inaudible voice. She drank thirstily as if to wash away the taste of the words she had spoken. As if her mouth felt soiled.

The two women faced each other like spent athletes on whose hearts and nerves an intolerable burden had been placed; who had entered a race which was beyond their strength to run.

Neither of them realized that Reynolds had left the room until he returned and spoke to Sara.

'I've telephoned the station. There's a train out of here in half an hour. I'll get your things.'

Sara turned away from Kay; away from the shocked hostility in her eyes. She felt chilled and saddened. Everything was lost to them now. She collected her furs and purse and beret and was about to follow Reynolds out the door, when she stopped and went back once more to Kay. And felt once more that breath of enmity.

'My coming here as I did was completely unpardonable. I ask and expect no understanding from you. But you were bound to know about me, Kay. Not by name, but by that note. Would you go back, if you could, and erase my presence here—and then spend the rest of your life wondering who that unknown woman was? You know now. Take a good look at me, Kay. Remember me. I'm not a ghost who would have haunted you. I'm just another woman, like yourself. A woman you learned to know, and to like.'

Sara stood for a moment, hoping for some response from Kay. But there was none. Then, in a voice which was like a sigh, a giving up of the last shred of comfort she could offer, she spoke for the last time.

'Kay, I did not know of your existence until the day before Mark was killed. But do not blame him for that. We were living from day to day, with danger our constant companion. And of us all, Mark suffered the most. Remember what you said, Kay—he had a great capacity for pain.'

Without waiting for an answering word or look, Sara followed Reynolds out of the house.

★ ★ ★

They walked silently down the steep, cobbled hill, Sara looking at the little houses as they passed them. They had all become alien now and Sara could almost feel them shrinking back into their protecting gardens; it was as if the narrow road had widened, so distant did they seem with their curtains snugly drawn against her.

I am leaving as I arrived, Sara thought—a stranger. I will leave no gap in the life here, because I had no place here.

There was Mrs. Timpole's house. Sara could picture her

beside an early autumn fire, her lap bright with colours from the heaped-up wools, her needle-point frame held towards the light. Sara listened. Was that music she heard, or did she only fancy it? It could be Mrs. Timpole's nephew trying out some arrangement for church on Sunday. Sara sloped up for a moment and looked back to the church, near the top of the hill, where it faced the wind and the sea. There was a light in the vicarage study; Mr. Penworth preparing his sermon, or playing a game of chess with Doctor Meade, if there were no spiritual or physical ills to be seen to that night. The rhythm of life here was like the rhythm of the sea, encompassing and embracing.

On down the hill she walked, the hill up which Mr. Pawley pushed his milk-cart and Mrs. Penryn carried her snowy wash. Now they were opposite Mary Nevis's cottage, the windows dark, for her two charges, the very young and the very old, went to sleep with the setting sun.

And there was Delia, the golden Labrador, sitting possessively at her own front gate. Sara half held a hand out, expecting the dog to come over to be petted. But Delia barked instead; a loud, warning bark as if to say, 'I spy strangers in the street!'

'Why, Delia!' Sara called out in a soft, reproving tone. But Delia only sat squarely on her broad haunches and gave low, disapproving mutters.

Jeremy Lewes's house was dark, but a light burned in the little laboratory where he was walled off in his private world. As they all were, one way or another.

For a time she would be remembered as 'Miss Scott: you know, that American who roomed at Kay Trevor's'. But soon, very soon, even her name would be forgotten and her memory blotted out. She had no place. She did not belong to these people, nor they to her. It had all been part of the dream.

Now even the cobble-stones seemed inimical and her heels slipped and twisted on them as if they had never trodden the road before. 'Hurry!' the stones seemed to cry at her. 'Hurry away! Faster, down the hill! Faster! These

stones of ours were laid for friendly feet, and to them we are kind. But you are a stranger, and to you we can be both sharp and treacherous. So, step firmly and quickly, and be on your way!' And following her down the hill came Delia's disturbed mutter.

Still walking silently beside each other, Sara and Reynolds came to a bend in the road which brought the sea wall into view and below it, the shingle beach with its boats. And another name rang through her mind: old Mr. Polworth looking up from his nets—'Aye, your dad was special—special at doing and special at daring.'

All the names so soon to be put away and forgotten, ringing through her mind like a bell. And with them, the old rhyme—'By Tre, Pol and Pen, ye know the Cornishmen.' Polworth, Penryn and Trevor!

As they turned on to the flat, the station and The Cornwall Arms showed the only lights in the village, and they were subdued, as became the hour.

After Reynolds had picked up his flight bag at the inn, they stood together in the shelter of the station waiting for the little train to pull out.

'Thank you for not speaking,' Sara said.

'There'll be time enough for talk,' came his comforting reply.

And they turned and paced the little platform, still within the sight and the sound of the sea and lapped around by its briny breath. A few passengers drifted down and checked their watches with the station clock. A guard announced, 'Only third class to Truro. Change there for the express.' Then Sara heard her name being called.

'Sara! Sara!'

And there was Kay, still in her rumpled cotton dress with only a sweater thrown over it, running towards them.

Sara waited, stiff with apprehension, and prepared herself for yet another blow, while Reynolds moved closer to her. But as Kay came nearer, running with quick, thudding steps, they could see her still streaked and tear-stained face, and stared in astonishment.

For when Kay stopped in front of them, her breathing deep and difficult, her whole being was flooded with warmth and sweetness. And her words came in little gusts, driven by urgency.

'I was so afraid—I'd missed you! I couldn't let you go without saying—without telling you—Oh, Sara! After you left the house I went into your room—Mark's room—and stood there and it was as if the walls spoke to me and I suddenly realized how much you must have loved him to have wanted to live among his things! And I knew how you must have wept behind that closed door! And I remembered Mark's words you gave me—which you *needn't* have given me!'

Kay paused to catch her laboured breath, and Sara felt the tears pushing through her eyelashes; she tried to hold them back and her throat swelled and throbbed with the effort. Then Kay came a step closer.

'And—Sara! You could have gone this morning! Gone away in safety, in secrecy, and left me alone. But you didn't. You stayed and tried to comfort me. Sat with me and talked with me and wept with me. What those first hours would have been without you, I cannot even guess! Without your kindness and your goodness. You gave me everything you could to help me, and then—and then you gave me the truth!'

Kay suddenly clasped her hands tightly together in a gesture so earnest and so touching, that Sara felt the tears spill out of her eyes and down her cheeks.

'Oh, Sara, don't let there be any bitterness between us! Let us not rob each other. Let us each keep what we had.'

But even through her tears, Sara could see the truth with devastating clarity, once and for ever.

'I had nothing. I know that now. You had the whole man. I had only a distorted fragment of his life.'

And the taste of tears was in her mouth as she finished, and she thought to herself—these are the last; this is the end.

Reynolds had not moved or spoken, just stood quietly beside Sara, for he dared not disturb the flow of Kay's

thoughts and words. And she had seemed totally unconscious of his presence. Now he put his hand out and gently covered Kay's clasped ones.

'What you have done has been very brave—very generous.' He couldn't trust himself to say more but added, tightening his hold on her hands, 'Bless you for it!'

Then there was a little flurry of movement as the few passengers started towards the train and the station-master blew his shrill whistle. Reynolds pressed Kay's hands warmly.

'I think we'll have to say good-bye, now—tell Brian I'm sorry we didn't have more time together. He'll make some man a fine companion when you start putting your life together again—'

'I'm going to try. Perhaps I've been tied to the past too—'

Reynolds collected the luggage, leaving the two women for a last moment together. Kay held her hand out to Sara. 'Good-bye Sara.'

As Sara took Kay's hand she felt once again the strength and warmth pour through her, as it had that very first day. And like the tolling of a funeral bell came the knowledge—I *would always have been 'second-best'.*

'Sara, I want to ask you one last thing before you go. Would Mark have come back to me?'

Sara looked at her and held on to that young, strong hand; and the words came surely and slowly:

'He never really left you.'

Then suddenly Kay's arms were about her and wet cheek was pressed to wet cheek, and Sara felt as if they were bathed in the healing waters of forgiveness and understanding.

Reynolds came back to Sara's side and took her arm, then spoke to Kay.

'Good-bye again, Kay—and again, God bless.'

And then, to Sara, 'The luggage is all in our compartment. There isn't much time.'

Kay moved away and stood watching them go, her soft hair blown about her face from which all the exhaustion had

and. She looked young and strong and more receptive to life; able to respond once again to its urgent beat.

As Sara sat down in the compartment she spoke to Reynolds without looking at him: 'Please, Carter—don't say anything kind to me!'

Then the engine gave its little toot and the train started to move slowly away from the station. Sara leaned out the window as she saw Kay, still standing and watching. *She will endure*, thought Sara. *Like the rocks in her Cornish sea, she will endure.* And then, *Oh, God! Let her be happy!*

Then Kay waved and called: 'Good-bye, Sara.'

'Good-bye, Kay.'

The train had gathered speed and Kay was already receding into the distance; into the past. But Sara still leaned out the window and, in a whisper, said: 'Good-bye, Mark.'